

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 1, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

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**Prologue**

**The sequel to 74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were. This prologue is set roughly three months after Katniss and Peeta return to District Twelve after the Games. The next chapter will start with the book and I'll be going chapter by chapter as I did in the first story. Thank you to my wonderful betas S and A for putting up with my crazy. Thanks for reading!**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

This was Peeta's favorite time of year, autumn, but this year the changing foliage didn't bring with it the feelings of happiness he had felt in all the years past. Once before he'd take whatever he could, a piece of coal, a pencil, on rare occasion colored charcoals, and sketch

the changing leaves. The reds, oranges and yellows always fascinated him. It was nature's way of creating art.

He sat under the giant oak tree, looking up at the branches and tried to find the desire to draw, but it wasn't there. It was never there at the tree. The first time he went there, he expected it to be a source of inspiration for him; it turned into a type of torture instead, yet he continued to go back as a form of penance. He had broken Katniss' heart and she hated him for it. Peeta and Katniss had spent so many afternoons beneath that tree. During the Games it was a comforting reminder of home. Now that he was home, he found no comfort. No sense of safety or security. There was too much danger lurking. The Capitol was always watching.

There were few places he and Haymitch could talk. For the first week they were able to whisper quietly in their own homes about sensitive information, and then they found out about the death of Seneca Crane and never spoke about anything of importance in their homes again. Seneca was the one informing them on whether or not the Capitol had figured out a way of wiring their houses. As it was, only Katniss' home had full working surveillance. Peeta couldn't use his phone without being listened to by the curious officials. He'd rip it out like Haymitch did, but what was the purpose? He only used it to talk to Effie and order his supplies.

He was rich now so he could afford to buy all the art supplies he wanted. He didn't have to work another day in the bakery, yet he baked every single day, it relieved the stress, and would volunteer his help several times a week at the shop. Delivery days. For some reason, throwing around the bags of flour gave him a sense of calm.

Peeta picked up a stick and started drawing in the dirt. His mind wandered to Katniss, nothing new for him, and he thought of his

actions after they got home from the Games. At the District Twelve dinner, they had acted like fools in love. He was sitting at the table with the Mayor and glanced over at Katniss. She was stunning. Cinna had provided her with some new clothes for local events and the dress she wore that night stopped Peeta's heart. A royal blue sleeveless dress with various shapes cut out at the neckline and along the back just above her waist.

Peeta made his way from guest to guest, shaking their hands with one and holding onto Katniss with the other. They were smiling, giggling...doing everything they were supposed to do amongst the officials from District Twelve. At one point he felt her squeeze his hand and thread her fingers through his. He looked into her eyes and thought, 'I can't let you go. We have to find a way to stay together.' He regretted ever agreeing to the rebels plan. Regretted walking away from Katniss on the train. He searched her eyes in the hopes that she'd feel the same way he did, but she looked away and his heart ached that much more.

After she had said her silent hello to Gale at the train station, he expected to see him hanging around more, but he was working in the mines now and Katniss couldn't risk going to the woods while the camera crews were hanging around. Peeta found himself in familiar territory. Once again he was loving Katniss from afar and completely jealous of Gale. They wouldn't have to hide a thing. They could still go hunting together when the cameras left. They could go to the Hob. Hide out in the woods. About the only thing they couldn't do was flaunt a romance and Peeta didn't think that would happen. He was sure Katniss had meant what she had said about never falling in love with someone. About not getting married or having kids. Peeta still didn't want kids, if the rebellion was successful he'd probably reconsider having children, but marriage? Yeah, he wanted that. He wanted that with Katniss. The only good thing about Katniss spending time with

Gale was that Peeta was sure he'd protect her, and Katniss' safety was all he ever wanted. Her safety and her love.

After each of the events, after the Games, he and Katniss would go to, they'd wait for the cameras to shut off and he'd feel her slip her hand out of his. She was always the first to pull away from their kisses...their hugs. He might have suggested a temporary split, but she was making it a permanent one.

He stood up from his position on the ground and braced himself against the oak tree. "One of these days, I'm going to get used to you," he said to his new limb. He let out a sigh and hung his head down. He was lonely. Today seemed to be a terribly bad day. "I miss you, Katniss," he whispered as he felt the rough bark of the tree against the palm of his hand. He wiped his dewy eyes on his sleeve, something he'd done a lot of in the past three months. He heard a rustling in the tree and looked up at it, but saw nothing. 'Probably just a squirrel,' he thought. He could feel eyes on him. He knew he was being watched. The Capitol saw everything. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on edge. He walked away, shuffling his feet along the rocky path. He didn't know the eyes that were following him did not belong to the Capitol. They belonged to Katniss.

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She walked into her house with a somber expression plaguing her face. Katniss had waited until Peeta was out of view before climbing down from the tree, stopping at their carved initials; she was sure he had put there before the Games. It was worn and smooth around some of the edges, something only nature and time could produce. She trailed her fingers along the letters P and M and felt the tears burning in the back of her eyes and her throat closing up. 'Put him out

of your head,' she thought. 'You have to go back to normal,' but there was no normality without him. She felt as though there was nothing but darkness and pain filling her soul. When her feet landed in the dirt, a puff of dust clouded around them. She looked down and saw what Peeta had been scratching at in the soil. He had drawn something. She turned her head to get a better angle and realized she was looking at what could have been her reflection. Peeta had drawn an image of her in the earth. She appeared forlorn and lost. 'Probably the way he remembers seeing you,' she thought. She kicked her foot and made a swipe with the sole of her boot to erase the picture. She didn't need to see it. If she had wanted to see it, she could just look in a mirror.

Prim was standing in her living room waiting for her. She had promised to take her to the meadow today so Lady could graze.

Prim had taken up arguing with Katniss as of late in regards to how strict she had become. Even her mother told her she needed to take it easier on her sister, but they didn't know how dangerous it was for Prim to roam alone in the district. The day her mother told her that Prim had gone to the meadow, Katniss had run there as fast as she could for fear that that would be the day the Capitol exacted their revenge, but she stopped short when she saw Peeta gathering herbs with her and Prim smiling at him. They had remained friends. Katniss had been worried that maintaining a friendship with Peeta would make Prim a target, but she was related to the Girl on Fire and nothing was more dangerous than that, so she said nothing about it. In a way she felt better knowing that Peeta had someone he could talk to. Prim had helped him go through some pretty tough times in his life before the Games, maybe she could help him now. That afternoon Katniss watched them for over thirty minutes until she heard Prim giggling and saw Peeta's sad smile. He hardly ever smiled when Katniss saw him. Even the hint of one brought a wave of sorrow and regret. There had

been so many times she had wanted to tell him that they should just ignore the Capitol's threats and take a chance on life. What was the purpose of living if they had to be apart anyway?

Katniss stuck out her hand to her sister's waiting form and held onto it. Prim had tried to help her out of the funk she had buried herself in, but Katniss couldn't tell her sister the truth. She couldn't tell anyone the truth. The one person she could talk to was Peeta and he was off limits, so she continued to sulk as she had since the cameras left District Twelve.

"Sorry I'm late, Prim. I got held up."

"I was just about to go to Peeta's and see if he could take me." Prim took her sister's hand and walked out of the house. "Where've you been?"

"Just walking...thinking."

"You've been doing a lot of that lately." Prim got her goat's rope and wrapped it around her hand. Katniss watched her do it and thought of the many times Peeta would wrap her braid around his hand and felt her stomach tighten at the memory of it.

"I need to do something to keep myself busy." Katniss had stopped going to school. There was no purpose for it anymore. She didn't need to educate herself on Panem's history and how great the Capitol was. She'd become part of history and she already knew what a sham the Capitol was. She had always known, just not to the degree she did now.

"Maybe you should go hunting?" Prim asked as she closed the gate that kept Lady in her section of their backyard.

"Maybe." Katniss tried to find a smile for her sister. She hadn't been to the woods since she had gotten back from the Games. It's not that she didn't want to go, she wanted to, but she hadn't faced Gale alone since coming home and she didn't know how to answer the questions he would most assuredly ask her. She put thoughts of the woods out of her mind and said, "So...what's on Lady's menu today? Grass? Flowers?"

"I guess we'll find out when we get there," Prim smiled up at Katniss. "Let's go."

They walked hand in hand in utter silence. Prim used to rattle on and on to her in the past, now she allowed Katniss the quiet she craved. When Katniss felt like taking her mind off of life, she got Prim to tell her about her school day. Today, Katniss wanted peace. Too bad she'd never find it.

Prim sat in the meadow holding onto Lady's rope as Katniss stood to the side. She could see their old house in the Seam from there. She preferred it to the mansion the Capitol had provided her. The old house held special memories for her. Memories of her father. Prim was talking to her, but Katniss wasn't paying attention. She was staring at the house...remembering happier times. She never thought of her life as happy until she got back from the Games. She never realized all that she had, but now that it was gone...she'd give anything to go back to the way things were. Back to hunting for their food and risking punishment. Back then it was only her hide she had to worry about. To a time when sneaking off to meet Peeta for lunch had been the highlight of her day, even if they did have to brave some snow and ice in the winter months, but the spring...the spring was her favorite time to remember. She closed her eyes and thought of Peeta pulling her face down to his. The feeling of his lips against her skin and whispering in her ear, "*Tell me you're not afraid of the person you*

*become when you're with me.*" At the time he said this to her, she was petrified. Now she was more afraid of the person she was becoming without him.

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"Katniss, you should really talk to him." Prim said as she walked her goat, Lady around the meadow. "Does he know how miserable you are?"

"I'm not miserable, Prim." Katniss said with a dismal tone in her voice.

"Forgive me. I didn't realize crying yourself to sleep every night for the past three months and waking up screaming were the signs of a happy person." Prim expected Katniss' scowl and flashed her a large smile in defense.

"Peeta doesn't want to talk to me," Katniss said blankly.

"For two people that are in love, you sure have a funny way of showing it."

"It's complicated, Prim."

Prim walked to the edge of the meadow and pulled one of the last remaining dandelions out of the earth. It was wilted, the petals turning to brown. She held it under Katniss' nose and said, "No it's not, Katniss. All you have to do is walk over to his house, knock on the door and say it. Just say, 'I love you' and I bet you anything he'll say it back."

Katniss' breath caught in her chest as she quietly said, "Read my lips," to herself.



Prim looked at her sister as she took the weed out of her hand and lifted it to her nose. "So tell him that," Prim shrugged. "Just talk to him. Say something...anything."

"Tell him what?" Katniss stared at the dandelion's petals and began pulling off the brown ones.

"Read my lips."

Katniss eyes flew to Prim's as she said with admonition, "Don't you dare say that to him, Prim. Don't tell him I said that." She was gripping Prim's arm.

Prim was taken aback by Katniss' reaction. She made a mental note to let those words slip out the next time she and Peeta took a walk. "What makes you think I talk about you with Peeta?"

"How else are we getting those damn cheese buns every other day?" Katniss cherished every single baked good Peeta supplied her family with. She'd hold them up to her nose and inhale the scent. The day he sent over loaves of raisin bread and herb bread the overwhelming scent of cinnamon and dill filled her house and Katniss ran to her old home in the Seam and cried.

"Maybe he makes them because someone always eats them and I can never get more than one?" Then again it could've been because Prim had told Peeta they were Katniss' favorites.

"Whatever." Katniss walked to the edge of the meadow and said, "Is that goat done eating yet? I want to go home."

"So go home. I know how to walk back to the village."

"I'm not leaving you here alone," Katniss was tapping her foot against the ground.

"You've become awfully protective of me since you've been back." Prim missed the days when she could walk to the meadow by herself and pick herbs. Now Katniss wouldn't let her go there alone.

"I've always been protective of you."

They began walking towards Victor's Village. "Let me rephrase that. You've become awfully *over*protective of me since you've been back. Both of you have."

"I just want to keep you safe, Prim." Katniss sighed and said, "I'm sure mom has your best interest in mind too."

"I wasn't talking about mom. I was talking about Peeta."

"Peeta?" Katniss looked down at her sister. "He's been protecting you? How...what's he...I mean..."

"Oh for goodness sake..." Prim stopped walking and put her hands on her hips. "...just ask me how he's doing!" Katniss was silent. "Fine, since you asked..."

"I didn't ask," Katniss tone was clipped.

"He's miserable too. He pretends he's not, but he is." Prim pulled on Lady's rope to get her moving again. "The truth is...I think he's pretty depressed, Katniss. When I went to return the bread basket the other day, I saw him through his window. He was crying and punching at his leg...you know...the fake one."

Katniss closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "What did he say when you went to the door?"

"I could see him wiping his eyes through the window when I knocked and he kept stumbling when he tried to get up from the floor." Prim had felt horrible for him at the time. She still felt sorry for him.

"He was on the floor? Did he fall?" Katniss wondered aloud.

"I don't know. It took him a few tries, but he finally got up and answered. I handed him the basket and said thanks and he took it from me. He didn't even say hi or anything. Which is strange because Peeta's always so polite." Prim picked up their pace and noticed Katniss lagging behind.

"Maybe he just tripped or something?" Katniss said more to herself than Prim.

"That's not the only time I've seen him doing anything like that, Katniss." Prim turned around and walked backwards. "I really think he's having a hard time with his leg." She faced forward. "Maybe he needs to go back to the Capitol so..."

"No!" Katniss snapped at her. "He can't go back there." Katniss walked faster towards their house. "He can't." When they got home Katniss asked in a very sweet, very fake voice, "Prim? Can you bring this back to Peeta's for me?" It was a basket that had been full of muffins earlier in the day.

"What happened to the muffins?" Prim had really wanted another one of those.

"Oh...uh...They were almost gone, so I finished the last two off."

"There were almost a dozen of them left when we went to the meadow," Prim had an accusatory tone in her voice.

"Maybe mom had guests." Katniss held the wicker basket out to Prim.

"Like who? Mom doesn't invite anyone over...ever."

"Haymitch could've stopped by...or...or..." Katniss shoved the basket at Prim and said, "Will you take this or not?"

Prim walked to their trash can and lifted the lid to see all of the muffins sitting on top of the garbage. "Not." Prim went upstairs to take the ribbons out of her hair. Her satisfied smile reflected back at her from the mirror when she heard her sister's bedroom door slam. 'Good enough for you,' Prim thought to herself. 'It'll do you some good to worry about Peeta. Plus you threw away a batch of perfectly good muffins.'

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"I'm coming," Peeta called down to the knock at his front door. He wiped the paint off of his hands with a dirty rag and opened it up. He had been expecting a delivery of art supplies, but he wasn't expecting it to be delivered by Katniss. "Uh...hi."

"Hi." She couldn't look at him. She didn't even want to be there, but her mother made her come. "We got one of your boxes by mistake."

Peeta looked around Katniss for the familiar crate that got delivered each month. "Oh...um...where..."

Katniss didn't know where the nerves came from, but she was overwhelmed with them and started spewing the first words she could think of out of her mouth. "Those stupid Capitol attendants brought it into our entry way and left it there. My mom thought it was the china

she ordered, but when I opened it up I saw a bunch of...I didn't mean to open it. I thought it was ours. If I had known it was yours I would've made them bring it here themselves." She knew she sounded like a complete moron, but she couldn't stop explaining why she knocked on his door. "I was going to call them and tell them to come back, but my mother..."

"Katniss." She kept rambling. "Katniss!" Peeta finally interrupted her and felt a smile forming at her discomfort. "It's okay. I'll just come and get it." He threw the dirty cloth on the floor by the door and followed her to her house. He didn't know why he thought her rambling was so charming, but he found it captivating. "So your mom ordered some china, huh?" He asked her as they walked.

"Yup," Katniss nodded and folded her hands against her chest. She had to put them somewhere. They were itching to grab Peeta's and walk hand in hand like they had done in the past.

"I'd like to see it...if you don't mind." Peeta was looking at the back of Katniss' head as she stayed a step ahead of him the entire time.

"That's up to her." Katniss knew how much he'd appreciate the pattern that had been hand painted on each and every plate. She hoped her mother would allow him to look at it. She could go up to her room and peek out of her bedroom door and watch him. 'Or you could just stay in the same room with him,' she thought to herself. 'What would be the harm?' But Katniss knew how dangerous it would be if she allowed herself to think of their dinner date in the cave. For a few moments during the Games, Peeta had made her believe they were in a place of beauty and not fighting for their lives.

Katniss opened her front door and walked in, leaving it open for Peeta, but he didn't go in. He stood just outside the door and waited to be invited inside.

"Katniss. Shame on you for leaving Peeta outside," Her mother scolded. "Come in, Peeta."

Katniss looked over her shoulder and said, "I left the door open for him." As if that was enough of an invitation.

"Have some manners, young lady." Her mother said and Peeta had to hide his grin at the memory of Effie constantly chiding Katniss about her manners.

Katniss pointed to a large crate and said, "It's over there."

Peeta wiped his feet off on the welcome mat in front of their door and said, "Thanks." He walked to the box and made conversation with her mother. "So I hear you got some new china."

"Yes, it just came today. I'm looking forward to using it."

"I'd love to see it sometime. If that's all right with you." Peeta stood up and spoke directly to Katniss' mother. "I'm somewhat partial to intricate designs."

"I remember," Katniss' mother smiled at him. "I have a wonderful idea. Why don't you come over for dinner and you can..."

"No!" Katniss clamped her hand over her mouth.

Peeta looked down at the floor and said, "I'll pass Mrs. Everdeen. I have to go to the bakery and drop something off for my mother..." Peeta had been giving her money each month as a way to smooth over the fact that he didn't want her to live with him in Victor's Village. She was furious with him. She had planned on living like a victor, but the moment Peeta said he'd be giving them a monthly allowance, she shut up. "...but I'd still like to see your new dinner service sometime."

He bent down and lifted the crate full of supplies. It was large and bulky. He wasn't sure if he could carry it home without tripping over his own feet. He gave the box a little jolt and thought he'd be better off waiting to get some help with it, but it was obvious Katniss wanted nothing to do with him, so he made his way out of their house and placed the box down on the street in front of him. He stared at it as if deciding on what to do and then kicked at it with his prosthetic leg. He didn't realize how hard of a swing he gave his leg and he felt a shot of pain shoot up his calf. "Son of a..." He clamped his lips closed. There was hardly any weight to the box as far as he was concerned; it was just the bulkiness of it that had him thrown. He bent down and lifted it again and walked a few steps. He could feel his leg getting wobbly so he put the thing down and almost fell on top of it. He looked over at Haymitch's house and gave a brief thought to asking his mentor to help him out with it, he'd want to know what was sent anyway, but waking up Haymitch would be a chore and Peeta didn't want to leave the box outside unattended. He gave himself a few seconds and just as he was about to lift it he heard Katniss.

"Want some help?"

He didn't want it, he needed it. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind." She had a sad look on her face as she took one end of the box. Peeta would've never had a problem with a crate this size before the Games, but he had both of his legs back then. Even though his prosthetic provided him with full use of his legs, he still had trouble navigating it...dealing with it and Katniss felt responsible for it.

"On three..." Peeta said to her. "One...two..." Katniss stood up from her bent over position and stared at him. Peeta stood up and looked back at her. They had both been thinking about it. The last time they tried to do something on the count of three was when they lifted a

handful of deadly berries to their lips. "Maybe you could just watch it and I can wake up Haymitch?"

Katniss shook her head at him. "No. I can do it." She bent over and placed her hands on the edge of the crate.

"Okay." Peeta matched her position. "Ready...set...go!" They lifted the crate and walked it to his house.

"Where do you want it?" Katniss asked as they set it down on the floor in his entryway.

"I can take it from here, Katniss."

"Your studio is in an upstairs bedroom, right?" It was no secret where he did his painting, but it surprised Peeta just the same that Katniss knew where he did it.

"Yeah, but I can do it."

"If you had a hard time carrying this across the street, what makes you think you can carry it up some stairs?" Katniss bent over to lift up the box. "I'll give you a hand."

"Okay," Peeta lifted the box with her and they walked it up the stairs, but set it in the hallway next to the bedroom. "This is fine."

"I don't mind taking it all the way inside."

"No. Really, Katniss. This is far enough." He didn't want her to go into his makeshift studio and see what he had been painting.

"Suit yourself." She turned to make her way back down to his front door, but stopped herself. "Look, Peeta. It's not that I don't want you to come over for dinner or anything...I just don't think we should give the



appearance that we're having some sort of happy, family dinner." Her eyes flashed past his shoulders into this studio. She could feel the blood draining from her face.

"Sure. Whatever, Katniss." He rubbed a hand up his arm. "You don't need to explain yourself to me."

She gave him a curt nod and left him standing at the top of the stairs. When she closed his front door she leaned her back against it and pressed her palms to it taking several deep breaths.

He got a screwdriver and stood on the side of the box Katniss had been on and pried the lid of the crate open. When he lifted his eyes he saw it. Katniss had had a perfect view of the painting he had just finished. She was sitting on a rock by the riverbed in the arena, staring at a blue flower that matched his eyes and surrounded by a silver mist that matched hers.

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He had barely said a word to Catnip since she was back. The cameramen were following her and Peeta around everywhere they went. They had even monopolized their time at home and, with his job at the mines, Gale barely had a moment to himself. He was determined to tell her how he felt, but then he watched them, from a distance, when they got back and Gale came to the conclusion that nothing he said would change Katniss' feelings towards Peeta. It wasn't until the day the parcels came with extra food, oil and grain, for the district, that Gale changed his mind.

*"Can I tie my boot?"*

*"Hurry up!" Posy called out to Gale from outside front door. "We're going to be late!"*

*"Yeah. Yeah." Gale was taking his brothers and sister to pick up the packages for Parcel Day. Every home in the district would be getting it once a month for the next year thanks to Katniss and Peeta's winning the Hunger Games. He no longer dwelled on their relationship. He put it to the back of his mind. His life was too busy these days to waste the energy on them, but on days such as this, there was no avoiding the Star Crossed Lovers of District Twelve. He walked with his brothers and sister to pick up their packages, intending on carrying back the bag of grain, but allowing the delivery men to bring the cans of oil back to his house. The square was bustling with people. Children running around with tins of applesauce, cans of meat and candy.*

*"There's candy!" Posy called out when she saw a child run in front of her.*

*"No eating candy for you until mom says so," Gale winked at her as he said it. "Don't want to spoil your dinner." He lifted his sister up into his arms and gave her a little tickle.*

*Each family had a designated time to pick up their parcels. They were told they could arrive no more than fifteen minutes early. There were extra Peacekeepers at the door of the Justice Building to keep everyone at bay. No one would be stealing any extra rations. Even with the crowd of people, Gale was surprised to find that the line was moving swiftly. He was surprised the Peacekeepers had been so organized in their distributions. Naturally there was a crowd at the front of the line, and plenty of celebrating. That's when Gale saw them. Katniss and Peeta weren't handing out the packages, but off to the side, being recorded of course, and talking with the children. Katniss' face was beaming with joy. Gale tried to pull his focus away*

*from them, but there was no avoiding them after getting his family's share of the spoils.*

*"It's your cousins, Katniss." Gale felt like Peeta was pouring salt into his wound with his statement.*

*"Hi!" Gale didn't think she could smile any bigger, but she did.*

*"Tell me something Rosy Posy," Peeta bent down to her. "Did you find that candy yet?"*

*"No. Gale said I have to wait until I get home," she put out a fake pout.*

*"What a big meany," Katniss chuckled and took a piece of candy from her pocket and snuck it to Posy.*

*"Speaking of home...we should get going. This bag of grain is heavier than I thought."*

*"You should try lifting the sacks of flour they get at the bakery," Peeta smiled.*

*Gale just gave them a nod and said, "Well, see ya around."*

*"Hey, Gale!" Peeta turned to the cameramen and said something then walked over to him. "Got a second?"*

*'Not for you dough boy,' he thought. "Sure. What can I do for you, Peeta?"*

*Peeta put his hand on Gale's shoulder and said quietly, "I held up my end of the deal. I kept her safe in the arena."*

*Gale flashed his eyes towards Katniss then back to Peeta. "Wha..?"*

*"We had a deal...remember?" Peeta asked him. "I held up my end of it. I expect you to do the same."*

*The morning of the reaping Peeta had told Gale that he'd keep Katniss safe in the arena as long as Gale promised to keep her safe when she got home, but now that Peeta came back with her... "Isn't that your job?"*

*"Just until the cameras stop rolling." Peeta stuck his hand out as if to shake Gale's. "Then..." He glanced at Katniss. "I'm counting on you."*

*Gale shook Peeta's hand and they said their farewells.*

*'Had he been right all along?' He wondered. 'Had Katniss and Peeta been playing for the cameras? Had they faked their romance in the arena in order to win over the sponsors?'*

The cameras left weeks ago. Since then Katniss and Peeta seemed to be leading separate lives. Everyone in the district was talking about it. Wondering what the two of them had argued over to cause them to split apart. But Gale knew it was because the cameras were gone. Now Gale was headed to the woods, like he did every Sunday and to his surprise, Catnip was waiting for him. His feet couldn't seem to move. She looked beautiful. Troubled, but beautiful.

She finally noticed him standing there and walked, then ran to him. He grabbed her in a bear hug and swung her around.

"What are you doing here?" He asked as he buried his face in her shoulder.

"I...I..." They both laughed when she kept hiccupping against him. She held up a finger to him and held her breath, but it did no good. "I...nee..." Her shoulders slumped in a fit of exasperation. She drank

something out of a thermos and waited until they were gone. "Hi there, cuz." She put her arm through his and dragged him towards the bag of food she packed for them.

Gale gave her a disgruntled look and said, "When did we become related again?"

They both made a feeble attempt at laughing and sat down to the feast she had packed for them to enjoy while in the woods.

"So how's your real family? I haven't seen Prim in ages."

"They're good. Things have actually been getting better between me and my mom, if you can believe that. And Prim...well...she's thrilled with her new room."

"I bet." Talk about their personal lives immediately went on the backburner. From that point on they spent their time hunting, checking snares and foraging through the woods.

"It's getting late. My mom and Prim don't know where I went so...I should really get back. I was thinking though...since I don't have anything to do during the day, maybe I could check the snares for you? It's not like Peeta and I..." She stopped talking and let her head hang down. She shook it out then lifted her face to his, but her smile and her eyes were full of sorrow.

'You're at the fence. If you're gonna do it, do it now,' Gale thought to himself. He cupped her cheeks in his hands and placed a kiss against her lips. She didn't move at first and then her fingers traveled up to his head. When she slid them through his short, black hair she jumped away from him. "Sorry. I had to do that. At least once," he confessed.

"I shouldn't have let you," Katniss had tears building up in her eyes. "I shouldn't have..." Katniss ran back into the woods, away from the opening in the fence.

Gale followed her into the forest. "I'm sorry, Catnip. I didn't mean to...to..."

"It's not that," her voice was shaking.

"Then what is it?" The tears started streaming down her face. "Is it him, Catnip? Do you...do you actually love him?" Gale stepped away from her as she buried her face in her hands and sobbed as though someone had died. "It was real," he said as if uncovering a dirty little secret. "How long, Catnip? How long have you two been....been..."

"It doesn't matter anymore," She lifted her tear streaked face. "It's over."

"Wonder how the nation will feel about their precious lovebirds breaking up?" Gale said with disgust.

"They can't know." Katniss sat down in the dirt. "And you can't speak a word of this to anyone."

"What? Like it's a secret?" Gale started pacing back and forth in front of her. "Everyone knows something is going on with the two of you. They either think you two were faking it to get out of the arena or had a fight." Gale looked down at her. Her knees were pulled up to her chest and her shoulders were quaking. "Is that what it was, Catnip? Did you have a fight?"

She shook her head and said, "I can't tell you."

Gale blew out a burst of air through his nostrils and said, "You know...you used to tell me everything."

"I can't tell you this." She reached out and put a hand on his leg. "I could get in a lot of trouble just for talking about this with you. It's just...when you kissed me...he hasn't...Peeta's gone...and..."

Gale dropped down to his knees and asked, "Did he do something to you? Did he hurt you?"

"No," she wiped her nose with her sleeve. "I hurt him. I hurt him so badly, Gale."

"Because you were only pretending to love him?" She didn't answer. "Damn it, Catnip. You have to tell me something. You can't kiss me and start crying and think I'm going to be satisfied with these clipped answers." He put his finger under her chin. "Don't I deserve more than that?"

"Yes," she nodded. It took her a little while, but she finally said, in a very hushed tone, "I'm so afraid, Gale. So scared of what can happen."

"What's going to happen?" He matched his vocal level to hers. It wasn't like Katniss to be afraid...of anything.

"I loved him, Gale. I still love him, but the thing we did with the berries...we're in a lot of trouble for it and the only way we can stay out of trouble is to stay out of love."

"Geez," Gale let his body drop down. "How much trouble are we talking about?"

"They could kill him...us...my family...you..." Katniss started crying again. "That's why..." she tried to catch her breath but she couldn't.

"Catnip, it's okay. It's going to be okay." He reached out and took her in a hug, but she didn't hug him back.

She sat and cried until she was cried out. She wiped her eyes on the hem of her shirt, reached into the bag of food and searched out a napkin so she could blow her nose and looked at Gale defiantly. "It's what I wanted. I never wanted a boyfriend or a husband and I cannot have children. So this is all for the best."

"I don't understand, Catnip. You've got to keep up the romance thing while everyone is watching, but you can't have the real thing because...?"

"Because that's what they want. They want to make us suffer. They want to keep us apart."

"Screw them!" Gale had no clue why he was defending Katniss and Peeta's relationship, but it bugged the hell out of him that the Capitol was trying to control the lives of everyone around him.

"I wish. I wish I could just tell them all to go to hell, but I can't. They'll take it out on everyone around us." She looked at him with pain in her eyes. "They'll take it out on Peeta, and I can't let them do that. I won't let them win."

"No offense, Catnip, but it looks like they're already winning." Gale sat next to her and leaned back on his hands. "Have you two actually thought this thing through? You're going to have to play the happy couple whenever there are cameras around. All through the Victory Tour and every year you go back to the Capitol for the Games they're going to want to know what's going on between the two of you."



They're going to keep rehashing the romance... Meanwhile, back at home, you two have to pretend not to care." Gale took a deep breath and said, "You'll never be able to live your own life. Never be able to...to fall in love with anyone else."

"I wouldn't anyway," she snapped. "Like I said, I never wanted this." She stood up and dusted off her pants. "I'm sorry I bothered you with this. I shouldn't have said anything." Her face was stone, but her voice cracked when she said, "I never wanted to fall in love with Peeta Mellark."

Gale studied her. She might have been regaining her composure, but he could tell she was hurting inside. "You may not have wanted it, but you did." She didn't reply. "What are you going to do about the talk around here? People are wondering about you two."

"I don't know. We didn't really think about that."

"Maybe you should've." Gale stood up next to her and lifted up their bags. "Your mom could probably help out with that though."

"I can't tell her! And you can't either! You can't tell a soul!"

"I'm not going to," Gale defended himself. "Look, when she did the interviews, while you were in the arena, she kept saying you were too young to date. Why not use that as an excuse?" Gale shrugged.

"She's said it often enough to the interviewers after we got back too. I guess that would work. "

"Sure it will, Catnip." He handed her bag to her. "There's just one thing I have to ask you though."

"What?" She put the bag over her shoulder and sniffed back the last of her grief.

"I know why I kissed you, but...why did you kiss me back?" Katniss turned bright red and looked away from him. "That's what I thought." He paused. "I'm not him, Catnip. No matter how tightly you close your eyes, when you open them up, it'll still be me. The next time you kiss me, I'd appreciate it if you weren't pretending I was Peeta."

Gale started walking to the fence. Katniss reached out her hand and stopped him. "I'm sorry, Gale. I never meant to hurt you." He nodded his head at her. He wasn't sure how he felt about her apology.

Before he walked through the opening of the fence he said, "Thanks for offering to check the snares. I think I'll take you up on that." 'You're still trying to take care of her, Peeta and she doesn't even know it.' He thought to himself. 'All right, I'll do my best to keep her safe here at home.' He made his way to the Hob to make his trades. When he was stopped by someone and they inquired about the trouble between Katniss and Peeta, Gale felt a little piece of him harden as he answered. "Her mother thinks she's too young to date."

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Peeta unpacked his art supplies and ran his fingers along the edge of the canvases. When he felt the one he knew would hold information on it, he pulled it out and poured a series of chemicals in a tin can. He dipped the blue handled paintbrush that came with his shipment into it and brushed the liquid across the upper left hand corner of the canvas. He blew a hot breath against it and watched as a series of numbers and letters appeared. The first time Peeta received a coded message from the rebellion via his art supplies he had to write it down.

Since then he had taken the time to memorize a couple of ciphers the rebels used. He had no need to write down today's message; he could read it as easy as he could read the alphabet. Peeta closed his eyes and let out a sigh as he processed the information that had been sent. He knew Haymitch wouldn't be happy about it...hell, he wasn't happy about it. There were more delays in the factory in District Eight. The cloak and dagger thing had taken a toll on him. There were times when he didn't want to be a part of the rebellion. He was sorry he had ever agreed to join them without Katniss' knowledge. Maybe if they had told her things would be different right now? Peeta put these thoughts out of his mind and quick. He had to remind himself why he had agreed to join. It wasn't just him and Katniss anymore and if things worked out, all of them...their whole nation could live in a place where the Games would no longer exist. Where Peacekeepers wouldn't whip a boy for dropping a basket of fruit. A place in which some people lived in the lap of luxury and others starved to death. A place where he would be free to love whoever he wanted and not worry about the consequences. Peeta dipped the blue paintbrush in some green paint and flushed the chemical mixture he had made down the toilet.

It was time to wake up Haymitch. "Wake up!" Peeta yelled at Haymitch as he walked into his mentor's house. When the man didn't budge from his face down position on his sofa, Peeta walked up to him and snapped the rag he had hanging over his shoulder, against his butt. "Get up, old man!" Peeta tried not to breathe in through his nose as Haymitch's house smelled from a barrage of stale vomit, dirty dishes, pots and pans with food in them since...who knows when, soiled clothing and empty liquor bottles. Lots and lots of empty bottles. "Come on, Haymitch. I'm not in the mood for this today!" He flicked the rag at his mentor again, but Haymitch didn't budge. Peeta began to panic. He bent down next to the man and began shaking him, but he didn't come to. "Haymitch!" Peeta screamed at him and fell back on

his butt when Haymitch's hand shot out from underneath him and punched Peeta squarely in the eye. "Son of...Damn it, Haymitch!" Peeta screamed at his mentor as he held a hand over his eye.

"Wha..." Haymitch began to come to.

"You hit me!" Peeta screamed at him.

Haymitch mumbled something to Peeta that sounded somewhat like the word sorry, and rolled off of the sofa and onto the floor. "Gotta pee," Haymitch looked at Peeta with dark, sunken eyes.

"Don't look at me. I'm not helping you." Peeta stood up and walked to the exit. "Come get me when you wake up." He left Haymitch's house with a hand over his eye. He examined it in his bathroom mirror and let out a few choice words for his mentor. Peeta was normally able to stop Haymitch from hitting him...throwing a knife at him...puking on him... His mentor woke up in very strange ways. Today however, his head was somewhere else. He walked to his freezer and went to get some ice, but found none in there. He looked at the counter and saw his empty ice trays there. "Great," he said to himself. If he didn't put something on it, it was bound to swell up. He began plotting his revenge against Haymitch as he walked to Katniss' house.

"Just hold this over your eye while I get the cream my mom uses for bruises. It should help." Katniss heard Prim talking to someone through an open window of their house.

"Thanks Prim. I appreciate it." It was Peeta. Why did Prim need to get something for a bruise. Katniss peeked out the window and saw Peeta sitting in their backyard with some ice over his eye. She ran to Prim when she heard the front door opening. "What happened? Why does he have ice over his eye?"

Prim shrugged. "Don't know. Ask him." She went to the apothecary and began searching for the lotion her mother made out of yams.

Katniss stood still for all of ten seconds before heading to the back of their house.

Peeta looked up at her and pulled the ice off of his eye revealing a bruise. "Hey."

"Your eye..."

"Yeah. I...bumped into something." He was too embarrassed to tell her that Haymitch had finally landed a punch.

Katniss put two and two together. Peeta was obviously lying and he had said he was going to the bakery to give his mother something. He only made excuses when she hit him. She smacked a hand against her thigh and said, "Hell, no. She is not getting away with this." She turned and ran before Peeta could think to stop her.

Prim walked out and saw Katniss running through Victor's Village. "Where's she going?"

"I...I don't know." Peeta stood there and a light went off in his head. "Oh, no!" He dropped the ice Prim had given to him onto the ground and jogged out of the village with Prim in his wake.

"What's wrong? Where is she going?" Prim asked as she caught up to him.

"The bakery."

"Why? You bring us everything we need."

"She thinks my mom...oh hell..." Peeta tried to pick up the pace, but he wasn't as fast as he used to be. "I thought she hated me."

"Who? Katniss? Or your mother?" Prim kept up a steady jog next to him.

"Katniss." Peeta answered.

"She doesn't hate you. She loves you. She cries all the time since you two stopped..."

Peeta stopped in his tracks. "She cries over...me?"

"She cries over everything. She even cried when we ate rabbit for dinner. Mom hasn't made any since."

Peeta started laughing quietly to himself. "She loves me." It was like the world had been lifted off of his shoulders. "She still loves me!" He smiled at Prim and then remembered where Katniss was heading. "Oh, crap!"

Katniss tore into the back door of the bakery and ignored the baker's greeting. She headed straight for the witch who was mixing something in a bowl with a wooden spoon. "Who the hell do you think you are?" She started tearing through the drawers of the bakery, pulling out any utensil that remotely resembled a wooden spoon and slamming them on the countertop. "You think you can just hit him and get away with it?"

"What...what are you doing here?" Peeta's mother stood unmoving and in shock at Katniss' abrupt demeanor.

"What am I doing here?" Katniss picked up the utensils she gathered and opened up the oven. She threw the wooden implements into the

fiery coals. "If you think for one minute..." She stalked towards Peeta's mother. "...that I'm going to let you hurt him, you're mistaken." She stood directly in front of the shaking woman and ripped the spoon out of her hand. "If you ever...EVER lay a hand on him again, I'll kill you."

Prim and Peeta made it to the back of the bakery and heard Katniss yelling. "Peeta, I think she's going to kill your mother."

"Katniss!" Peeta called to her, but it was too late. Katniss had the woman pressed up against the counter and was practically spitting in her face.

"Try it! Just try it again, and it'll be the last thing you ever do! You've seen what I can with a bow and arrow!"

"Katniss," Peeta ran in and pulled her off of his mother. "Stop it!"

Peeta's father and brothers all stood back and watched as Katniss threatened Peeta's mother. Peeta was dragging Katniss off of his mom with both hands while Katniss continued to scream at her over his shoulder. "I won't miss! I swear to you, I will not miss! Right through the eye!"

Peeta flung Katniss over his shoulder and hauled her past a shocked Prim and out the backdoor. "Knock it off."

She was flailing her arms and yelling at him, "Put me down! Damn it, Peeta! Put me down." He looked to his left and then his right and began jogging.

"I'll put you down when you calm down."

"Now! Drop me!" She started pounding her fists against his back.

Peeta saw what he was looking for. The meadow was just a few yards away. "Stop fighting me," he grunted when one of her flailing fists hit him in the ribs. "You're hurting me, Katniss."

"Put me dow...OW!" He dropped her on her butt onto the grass.

"Fine. You're down." He started rubbing at his side where her fist landed. "What the hell was that all about?" He pointed towards the direction of the bakery.

"I know that we agreed to stay out of each other's lives, but I just couldn't let her..." Katniss looked up at his black eye and said, "I'm going back there and kicking the..."

"Katniss! She didn't hit me!" Peeta grabbed her by the upper arms before she could sprint back to his parent's bakery.

"Don't make excuses for her!" Katniss yelled at him. "I told you I wouldn't let her lift a hand to you."

"And I told you I wouldn't let that happen either." Peeta lowered his voice down to a melodic tone. "And I haven't. I won't." he gave Katniss a little shake.

She stood staring at him...at his eye. "Then how did you get..."

Peeta grinned and said, "I bumped into something."

"Don't! I hate it when you lie to me so don't do it!"

"I'm not lying. I bumped into Haymitch's fist." Peeta smiled. "After I tried to wake him up."

"You mean..." Katniss stepped backwards away from Peeta.

"Haymitch gave you that?"



"Yeah, but if it makes you feel any better, I plan on seeking revenge." Katniss' face started to flush. "Hey..." Peeta tilted his head to the side and spoke tenderly to her. "I'm fine. It doesn't even hurt...well it hurts, but only a little." He took baby steps towards her. "Katniss?"

"What?" She couldn't look him in the eyes.

"Why'd you do that? Defend me that way?" He was hoping she would tell him she didn't hate him. That she still loved him.

"I...I...I just did. That's all," She crossed her arms over her chest and turned her back to him.

He placed a hand, gingerly on her shoulder and said, "You know...people might think you actually care about me if you do things like that." He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin.

The warmth of his hand against her shoulder felt impossibly good. "I do care about you."

"Do you?" He turned her slowly towards him. "Because...I didn't think you did anymore. You barely talk to me. You won't even look at me."

Katniss was staring at her feet. "Wasn't that what we agreed to do?"

"I'm not sure what we agreed on." He stepped closer to her. Boy, did he want to kiss her.

If she stood this way with him much longer, she knew the past few months would be for nothing and she'd be jeopardizing his safety. "We agreed to forget we ever loved each other."

"No. I never agreed to that."

She stepped back. "I should get home."

"Don't leave, Katniss. Let's talk." He begged her.

"We can't."

"We could go into the woods or something." He spoke quietly. "No one will see us there."

She shook her head, "No." It killed her, but she looked into his eyes and said, "I'm not sorry."

"For what? What aren't you sorry for?" His heart was racing with anticipation. He had been waiting months for her to answer his question as to whether or not she regretted loving him.

'For loving you,' she thought to herself. 'For letting you love me. For any of the time we spent together.' "For yelling at your mother. She might not have given you that black eye, but I owed her for the one she gave you years ago...for all of the marks she put on your body." Her eyes dropped to the spot on his chest where the burn had been.

"They're gone now. All of them. There are no more marks on my body...no scars."

"Good." Katniss headed back towards her house and saw Prim standing at the edge of the meadow staring at them. "I'll see you around, Peeta."

"Stay," He begged.

"See ya," she repeated her farewell.

He heard her tell Prim it was time to go home, but Prim said she was walking back with him. When Katniss was out of sight, Peeta sat in the center of the meadow allowing his mind to race. 'You still love me,

Katniss. I really thought you hated me. I thought you'd never forgive me and now...now...'

"Boy, I'd hate to be your mom right now." Prim sat next to Peeta and crossed her legs.

"She looked pretty scared, didn't she?" Peeta glanced down at Prim.

"She looked like she was going to pee her pants." Prim tried to hold the laughter in, but it escaped in a little burst of air through her nose and then she heard Peeta chuckling to her side. Prim bit her bottom lip and let out a huge giggle. Both of them sat in the meadow laughing at the image of Peeta's mother being threatened by Katniss with a wooden spoon.

Katniss was slugging back to Victor's Village. 'Idiot! Why did you do that?' She began talking to herself in her mind.' Because you assumed it was his mother. She had hit him so many times before. Before the Games, but what about now? Like Peeta being a victor was going to change the witch. If anything she's probably even meaner since she still has to live above the bakery while Peeta lives in a mansion by himself. And why did Haymitch hit him? Because he was trying to wake the man up.' Katniss didn't care what the reason was. When she got back to the village she stormed into Haymitch's house and before he could get out the words, hi, sweetheart, she slugged him in the eye. There was a sweet sense of serenity inside of her when she heard Haymitch's scream of pain.

Prim and Peeta sat in the meadow, for a little while, laughing. "I really shouldn't find this amusing. She's my mother, but..."

Prim giggled behind her hand. "Did you see that fire?"

"No."

"There were a bunch of wooden utensils in there. I think Katniss threw every spoon your family owned in there," Prim couldn't stop laughing at the memory of Peeta's family standing to the side and watching the events. "And your dad...he didn't even move. He just stood there."

"My brothers didn't do anything either," Peeta's stomach hurt. "Prim, we really need to stop laughing about this." This, of course, brought on another round of laughter. "We Mellark men are such cowards," Peeta's laugh ended in a sigh.

Prim stopped laughing and said, "No you're not."

"Oh, Prim." Peeta tugged on one of her braids. "You have no clue." He stood up and held his hand out to her. "Come on."

"No." She took on a serious expression. "Why would you think you're a coward? You're the bravest boy I know...the bravest boy in all of Panem. You saved my sister's life. You fought the Careers."

"I hid what my mother did to me my whole life," Peeta added.

"Yet you still faced her, knowing what the outcome would be, and gave Katniss that bread." Prim looked up at him from her sitting position and said, "You've always been courageous, Peeta."

"Thanks, Prim, but I never did any of that because I wanted to be a hero. I did it for her." He let his hand drop and lifted a shoulder. "I should've fought harder for her."

"How much harder could you fight?" Prim patted the ground next to her and Peeta sat. "You did everything you could. It's not your fault Katniss is stubborn and doesn't want a husband or anything."

"What do you know about that?" Peeta asked her with a curious gleam in his eye.

"Katniss has spent my whole life telling me I shouldn't fall in love. I shouldn't get married. I shouldn't have kids... Apparently I shouldn't have a life."

Peeta chuckled. "She's just trying to protect you from getting hurt."

"She tries to protect everyone she loves." Prim turned to Peeta. "Like you."

This brought a smile to Peeta's face. "Yeah...she's always trying to keep me safe."

"Just like in the arena. She'd do anything to make sure you stayed out of danger. If she could put you on a shelf under a glass dome and keep you there, I think she would. She'd probably just stare at you everyday and sigh," Prim batted her eyelashes at Peeta.

He bounced his shoulder against hers and grinned. "Prim? You said Katniss has been crying over me? Did you mean that or are you just trying to get us back together?"

"Nope. I meant it. She's even talking to herself. Saying weird things." Prim remembered what Katniss had warned her not to say to Peeta. "I have no clue why she keeps saying, 'read my lips' to herself." Peeta's eyes shot towards Prim, but she didn't stop talking. She knew she had him by the expression on his face. "And I'm not too pleased with you about this...thing that's happened between the two of you." Prim scolded him. "The Peeta I knew would never let anyone get in the way of loving my sister. He would've never given up on her even if she was the one standing in his way." Prim crossed her arms over her chest. "Nothing was more important to him than being with Katniss."

"She's still the most important person in the world to me, Prim." Isn't that why he was keeping his distance from her?

"Then fight for her!" Prim turned her body to face Peeta. "You two did everything short of dying so you could be together in that arena, Peeta. If loving Katniss was worth fighting for in the arena, isn't she worth it out of the arena too?"

"Yeah." Peeta looked down and studied a patch of dying grass. "This sucks," he glanced up at Prim.

"It doesn't have to. You can win her back."

"I'd like to. Believe me, but..."

"But nothing. Peeta, don't let anyone tell you how to live your life. It's yours. If you want to be with Katniss, then be with her." She stood up and held her hand out to his. "Otherwise, there was no point to anything you did during the Games...no reason for the nightlock. You two might as well have battled each other to the death when the Gamemakers changed the rules back to one victor."

'How can a twelve year old girl know more about life than a room full of rebels?' Peeta thought to himself. This is exactly what the Capitol wanted. Katniss and Peeta were a threat as a couple and wanted to force their separation in order to get their final battle. The one the Games never provided. Would the Capitol hurt Katniss? He didn't think so. No. He knew they wouldn't. They were both too much in the public eye as was their families. Prim was right. Katniss and Peeta may have been pronounced the winners of the Games, but if the Capitol kept them apart, they'd be the winners and Katniss and Peeta's actions with the berries would be for naught ultimately hurting the rebellion. Peeta was keeping his distance from her for the rebel's sake, but what good would Katniss be to them if she was a crying

mess? Katniss' current emotional state would cause more damage to the rebellion than good. If they wanted to succeed, they needed the girl that blew up the Careers' food. The girl that buried Rue in flowers. They needed the Girl on Fire. Peeta knew what he had to do. It was time to rekindle Katniss' flame. "Prim," Peeta stood up and put his hand in hers. He wasn't sure if he was doing this for the rebellion or for himself, but it had to be done. "How'd you like to help me win Katniss back?"

"Now we're talking." Prim smiled brightly. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking she might need to climb a tree...an oak tree."

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 2, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter One: Courting Katniss**

**As usual I shall now go chapter by chapter and put my own spin on things. Thank you for the wonderful reviews and for reading this story. I am more than grateful. To my betas, S and A... You guys are the best! They don't just correct my spelling and horrendous grammar, they help me to see where the story needs work and help me to add little nuances throughout. So everyone say thank you to S and A! "Thank you, S and A!" Shall we read the next installment of...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

The sound of snow crunching underneath her new boots echoed through the streets of District Twelve. An empty game bag over her shoulder, a new coat holding in her body's warmth and the scent of baking bread filling her nose. Katniss turned her head and saw the light from the bakery shining like a beacon along the edge of a dark and desolate town. In a few hours the shops would be busy, but at this time of the morning, the only place lit up was the bakery. Through the window she could make out the image of Peeta's mother stocking the display case. Katniss walked closer to the bakery and looked through the window from a few yards away. The witch was alone in her tasks. Every now and then Katniss took great pleasure in taunting the woman through the window of the bakery, peering at her as if reminding her she's always being watched. Katniss hadn't planned on doing that this morning, though she never really planned on doing that to Peeta's mother, she just took advantage of the situation when the market area wasn't packed, but she needed something to brighten her day and giving the witch a little spook seemed like it would hit the spot. She took a few steps towards the store front and noticed the white paint that said, 'Mellark's Bakery'. 'This was the window Peeta watched you through before throwing you the bread,' she thought to herself. Peeta's mother turned her head towards the back of the bakery, as though someone was calling to her. She wiped her hands



off on her apron and stood up. Peeta and his father walked into the front of the store and Katniss quickly stepped into the shadows, hoping they hadn't seen her. She ducked down and peeked through the corner of the window at the scene before her. She wondered what they were saying...if Peeta's mother had ever mentioned the day Katniss had accosted her. Peeta's father laughed at something and Peeta shook his head as though he made a dumb joke then joined him in the laughter. The witch didn't crack a smile. 'Her face might break,' Katniss thought. His father took a hold of Peeta by the upper arms and said something to him then pulled Peeta into a hug. Once released, Peeta turned to his mother. Without looking directly at him, she said something to Peeta who placed his hand on hers. His mother turned away from Peeta and he closed the space between them, placing a kiss on her head and hugging her. At first she was motionless and Katniss wondered how the woman could deny him the love he had so desperately craved his entire life. 'Isn't that what you're doing, Katniss?' She asked and answered herself. 'Oh, shut up.' Peeta's mother lifted her arms and squeezed Peeta. She nodded her head at him and Katniss could swear the woman had tears in her eyes. Peeta put his arm around her shoulder, a large bag of bread was dangling from his fingers and said something to his parents causing all three of them to laugh. Well, Peeta and his father laughed. The witch kind of rolled her eyes and lifted the corners of her mouth. Peeta dropped his hands and headed straight for... The sound of the little bell that hung over the bakery's door jingled just as Katniss hid around the side of the bakery. She hugged the side of the building and took notice of the empty pig pen.

"Don't worry, son. It'll all work out in the end," Katniss heard Peeta's father.

"Thanks, dad. I hope you're right."

"Have I ever been wrong?" Katniss could hear a sound coming from his mother somewhere between a choke and a huff.

"Does the sun rise in the east?" She asked. 'The woman knows how to make a joke,' Katniss was surprised by this.

Peeta's soft laughter floated through the air and caused a stirring in her belly. "I'll see you guys when I get back." His parents said a few parting words to him. Peeta started to walk away and Katniss closed her eyes in a childish attempt at hiding from his view, as though doing so would make her invisible. "Mom," Peeta stopped walking and Katniss opened her eyes. He studied his feet then looked at the bakery's entrance. "I want you to know...I love you, mom."

His mother didn't say it back. Katniss' heart broke. He looked like a little boy again. A woolen cap pulled over his sandy blond locks, curls peeking out from beneath. His nose was rosy and the natural pink tone in his cheeks was exaggerated from the cold. He was pulling on a pair of mittens as he turned on the heel of one boot then looked down to the ground. He started walking out of town with a bag full of bread in one hand and his broken heart in the other.

"It's cold out here. Want some tea?" The baker asked his wife.

"No. I'm all right." She heard a little tinkle of the bell and waited until Peeta was out of sight before getting ready to run past the bakery, hopefully, unnoticed. Just as she was about to step around the corner she heard his mother say, "I love you too, Peeta." The sound of the bell on their front door rang out and the door closed.

Katniss stood still for several minutes trying to make sense of what she heard. She couldn't understand why his mother didn't just tell him. Why she let him walk off without letting her son know how she felt about him.

As she hunted through the woods that morning, she kept hearing Peeta's mother's confession in her mind. She wanted to tell Peeta what his mother had said, but it wasn't her place. If the woman wanted to tell Peeta she loved him, then she'd have to do it on her own. Peeta deserved to hear the words from his mother's lips, not repeated by Katniss. She stocked up her game bag, all the while comparing herself to Peeta's mother. 'What makes you so different? He's desperate to hear you tell him you love him. But if you do, Katniss, there's no turning back. You can't keep breaking his heart. And you can't tell him you love him either. You might as well shoot him with the arrow that's loaded in your bow. She couldn't even hug her own son! You're no better, Katniss. You can't even hug the man you're in love with unless he initiates it.' Her internal argument was driving her to the brink of insanity. 'I'm trying to keep him alive...trying to keep him safe. What's her excuse?' There was none as far as Katniss could see and that's where the difference lay in her eyes. What she was doing was for Peeta's benefit. What his mother was doing was out of the cruelest intentions.

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This is the day Peeta had been waiting for. Though he wasn't thrilled with the whole premise of the Victory Tour, going to each district and flaunting their win was the Capitol's way of keeping the Games alive all year long, this tour was crucial to the rebellion. Admittedly, he was also anticipating the return of his and Katniss' public romance.

Things hadn't progressed as rapidly as he had hoped with he and Prim had been working together to get Katniss to reconsider their break up, Katniss' guard was always up. Peeta smiled to himself thinking, but I've gotten you to drop it on many occasions. It was those

moments...those times when Katniss would let Peeta sneak back into her heart, that kept him going. Eventually she'd put the walls back up, but for a little while, Peeta would get a taste of what they had once shared. He remembered when he had talked to Prim about bringing Katniss to the oak tree and what had happened afterwards.

*Peeta walked towards the oak tree, picnic basket in hand, side by side with his brother. "You sure you don't mind doing this?"*

*"Why would I mind?" His brother asked. "You and Katniss belong together. Besides..." His brother's face lit up with a smile. "...I owe her one for taking on mom." He looked at his brother.*

*"Has mom said anything about that?" Peeta asked.*

*"I don't think she will ever speak the name, Katniss again." His brother chuckled. "Damn, that was priceless." Peeta's brother stopped walking and put a hand on his shoulder. "And a long time coming." He looked at his feet and said, "I'm sorry I didn't stand up for you more often, Peeta."*

*"Hey, you tried."*

*"I could've tried harder." There was guilt written all over his brother's face.*

*"Then we'd both have been her punching bag." Peeta remembered the time his brother got in front of his mother when she had lifted her weapon of choice to him. She not only hit his brother, but he got a beating he'd never forget. It was on the first day of school. The day he fell in love with Katniss. "I don't have any regrets, man. As far as I see it, everything in my life has led me up to this point so...no regrets."*

*They started back on their path and stood back in the sparse bushes, waiting for Prim to show up with Katniss.*

*"...because I'm worried about them, Katniss. Their mom hasn't been back to check on them for days," Prim said to Katniss who was walking her home from school.*

*"I'm sure the eggs will be fine. Their mom is probably out looking for food." Katniss was arguing with her sister.*

*"No, Katniss. She's gone and if those eggs aren't taken care of..." Prim pouted something she only did when she wanted to get her way with Katniss. Pouting was for babies.*

*"This is ridiculous." Katniss hugged the giant oak tree and got ready to climb it for her sister.*

*"Wait Katniss!" Prim stared up at the tree and walked around it, inspecting it closely. "Okay," she stood on the opposite side of the tree that Katniss was standing on. "Go up there," Prim pointed towards some branches. "...and I'll tell you where it is."*

*Katniss looked upwards and reluctantly said, "Prim, can't I get to it from the other side of the tree?"*

*'That side of the tree doesn't have yours and Peeta's initials carved into it,' thought Prim. "No." Prim flashed her the giant puppy dog eyes that always melted her sister's frigid temperament. "Please, Katniss? Please check on the nest for me?"*

*"Fine," Katniss grunted. She shimmied up the tree and sat on the branch that was right next to the carving. "Where is it?"*

*"Above your head," Prim called to her and made a hand motion towards Peeta and his brother signaling them to come closer. "Yeah, up there. If you look upwards you should be able to see it."*

*"Prim, I don't see any nests!" Katniss called down to her, but kept her focus upwards not noticing that Prim had company.*

*"It's there, Katniss! Keep looking!" Prim winked at Peeta and left with his brother.*

*"Where?" Katniss searched the tree's branches and saw no signs of an abandoned nest. She started sliding down the tree and her hand brushed against Peeta's carved initials. She stopped moving and let her hand trail over it.*

*Peeta could see her sighing from her perch above him and waited patiently for her to make her way down. When she jumped down to the ground, Peeta walked around the other side of the tree and said, "Find what you were looking for?"*

*Katniss jumped. "What are you..." She looked from left to right. "Where's Prim?"*

*"My brother is walking her home."*

He looked at the clock 4:08am. 'Today's the day she can't hide her feelings for me,' he smiled to himself as he got dressed and headed for the bakery to say his farewells to his parents.

The smell of fresh baked bread made Peeta's stomach growl. "Hi." Peeta walked into the bakery through the backdoor.

"Good morning," his father had a huge smile on his face.

"No need to come here in this weather. We know you're coming back this time," his mother made it sound like Peeta's showing up at the bakery was an inconvenience. She had a sour look upon her face when she noticed the snow Peeta dragged in from outside.

"I wanted to say goodbye." Peeta walked to his father and patted him on the back. 'I hope you're right, mom.' Peeta thought to himself. 'I hope the Capitol doesn't arrange for some kind of mysterious train derailment while Katniss, our team and I are all in one place.'

"Tea?" His father asked.

"Nah. Though I was hoping to pick up a few loaves of bread."

"Too good to make your own bread now?" His mother asked.

"There will be camera crews at my house today. I didn't think I should be baking beforehand." Peeta walked over to the cooling racks to see what they had made so far. "That's a lot of sourdough."

"Your mother didn't know I had made some of it and..."

"If you had told me I wouldn't have made a fresh batch of it," she jumped on his father's words.

"I'll take a six of those."

"I Hope you're not expecting a discount." His mother said those same words to him every single time he came in to buy something.

"I wouldn't want one, mother." Peeta had taken up calling her by the formal title when he felt his anger bubbling up towards her.

"We've still got two other boys we're supporting and this place is falling to pieces. I told your father we need a new roof."

"We don't need a new roof. We can patch up this one," his father blew out an exasperated sigh.

"What's wrong with the roof?" Peeta asked.

"Nothing." His father answered.

"It's a piece of garbage," his mother replied. "There's a bunch of leaks..."

"It's not leaking." His father shook his head at Peeta and said to his wife, "Why don't you stock the cases while I have a word with Peeta?" He put his arm around Peeta's mother and guided her towards the front of the store.

"I hope you have the good sense to ask him to pay for a new roof. It's the least he could do since he abandoned us here and went to live in a mansion," she attempted to keep her voice down, but Peeta knew she was saying it just loud enough so he could hear it.

When his mom was busy in the front of the bakery, Peeta's father started bagging up some bread for him. "Looks like I'm paying for a new roof," Peeta ripped a hunk of sourdough off of a loaf and ate it.

"We don't need one. She's just looking for something to complain about."

"Well...the sun isn't up yet. There's snow on the ground...I saw a squirrel outside..." Peeta gave his father a wag of his brows and said, "All excellent topics for her."

He and his father chuckled together. "Sit down. Let me get you some tea," his father offered the beverage to him for a second time.



"I'm okay, dad. I just wanted to come by and give you this." Peeta took an envelope out of his pocket and placed it in his father's hand.

"How many times have I told you, I don't need any money?"

"Humor me," Peeta said quietly so his mother couldn't hear them. His father took the envelope and stuffed it into his pocket. "And don't use it for a new roof either. I'll take care of that when the snow lets up." He took out some money, enough for seven loaves of bread, since he ate part of one, and placed it on the table. "Don't want mom to give you any grief."

"You're a good boy, Peeta."

"I learned from the best, pop." Peeta gave his dad a hug and a thump on the back. Somewhere inside of him, Peeta worried. He was about to go back to the Capitol, plus the rebellion had their practice run planned in District Eight. "I love you, Dad." Peeta had noticed a change in his father's demeanor since coming back from the Games. He was much more open towards him now. Always had a word of advice for him, a joke...some way of making Peeta smile and he was no longer afraid to show Peeta that he loved him.

"Love you too, Peeta." His father cleared his throat and said, "Guess you're pretty excited about the tour. Should be...interesting considering the circumstances between you and Katniss." His father said her name as though it wasn't allowed to be spoken.

"Actually things are progressing quite nicely between us. Not as quickly as I'd like, but..." Peeta gave him a quirky grin. "...I think this train trip is just what we needed to get back on track...pardon the pun."

"She's a stubborn one, that Katniss."

"Pig headed...stubborn...strong willed...Stop me whenever you like."  
Peeta and his dad smiled at each other. "But there's more to her than meets the eye." Peeta looked across the bakery shelves and stared at the cake decorating area. A wistful expression came upon him. "She's also quite bashful and...she's so funny, dad. She always makes me laugh. Always puts other people's needs ahead of her own...she's...nothing and exactly like she appears to be." Peeta turned towards his father. "Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense." His father gathered up the bags of bread and put them in one large bag. "Handing these out, I'm guessing?" Peeta nodded. "I'm not sure what's been going on with the two of you... I know we don't know the full story and I'm not going to butt in. I just want you to know I think Katniss will come to her senses soon enough. Then you two can move on with your lives."

"Dad, I hope you're right."

"I know I'm right. Am I ever wrong?"

Peeta started listing off a bunch of things to his father. "Well, there was the time you were sure we could catch the mouse with a book, a string and a paper bag. Then there was the whole basil, mint, rye bread fiasco and..."

"All right. All right," His father handed him the bag of bread. "Go say goodbye to your mother."

"Mom?" Peeta called out to her as he and his father went to the front of the store. "I wanted to say goodbye."

"Peeta and I were just talking about trying out that basil, mint and rye bread again. What do you think?" His father laughed. Peeta shook his head, made a funny face and his laughter joined his father's. Peeta's

father gripped his upper arms and said, "You go win Katniss' heart back, you hear me, son?" Peeta felt the security of his father's embrace and gave him a squeeze. "Love conquers all, Peeta."

His mother was looking past him as she said with a hint of sorrow to her voice, "It's humiliating...you being with Seam scum. There are so many other girls that are better..."

Peeta covered her hand with his and she turned away. "There is no one better than her. I love her, mom." He'd argue the fact that Katniss was a victor now, that she had never been 'Seam scum,' but he would only be opening up another can of worms and he wasn't in the mood for confrontation. He stepped closer to his mother, hugged her and kissed her head. "I know you two have had some problems, but if you could try to work past them...I'm sure I could arrange for a new roof in the spring."

Peeta's mother nodded her head at him and got tears in her eyes. He wondered if his mother was actually concerned about him and his relationship with Katniss. "We need that roof something awful. I can barely face my friends...me living here and you living in a mansion." 'And there it is,' he thought to himself. 'She could care less about me or any girl I decide to date. She was too concerned with her own appearance to the people of the district.' Sadly, Peeta knew he could buy his mother's love for Katniss. He just didn't imagine it would cost him a roof. Katniss was worth at least an entire bakery...the entire district.

"If you're really nice to Katniss, I might get a paint job for the outside of the building too," Peeta and his father laughed and his mother rolled her eyes and almost smiled. "I better get going." There were so many things he wanted to say to his parents before he left. Moving out had done him a world of good, but there were times like this...good times,

that he missed. They were rare, but they did exist and in his family, this was as good as it got.

"Don't worry, son. It'll all work out in the end," his father called out to him as he left the bakery.

"Thanks, dad. I hope you're right."

"Have I ever been wrong?" A familiar joke in their family. One that mom usually answered with...

"Does the sun rise in the east?"

Peeta had heard that so many times throughout his life, he and his brothers usually moved their mouths behind their mother's back and mimicked her, but today he found security in his parents familiarity. "I'll see you guys when I get back."

"Take care of yourself, Peeta." His father said to him.

"Try to look at some of those fancy cakes when you're at the Capitol. I bet we could make a pretty penny on a Capitol style cake," he heard his mom say the last part to his dad.

'If only you knew what the Capitol was really like,' he thought. "Mom." Peeta hadn't said it since he was a kid. He couldn't remember ever hearing the words from her, but he needed to tell her. To let her know that he forgave her. "I want you to know...I love you, mom." He could see how uncomfortable the words made her. He hoped that maybe if he had said it first...maybe he'd hear it back. There was nothing but silence. He felt like he was five years old again wondering what he could do to make his mother happy. 'Buy her a new roof,' he thought to himself as he walked towards the Hob to hand out some sourdough bread.

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*It had taken over a week for Peeta to arrange everything he needed for his first step in the courting of Katniss. He called Effie as soon as he and Prim had gotten back from the meadow the day Katniss had threatened his mother. He kept his plans of trying to win back Katniss' heart to himself, the Capitol was listening into his phone calls, but he could tell by the tone in his escort's voice, she was well aware of why he wanted the items he ordered. They arrived late Saturday morning just as Effie had promised.*

*Katniss' could feel her heart ripping apart at the sign of her and Peeta's initials carved in the tree. It didn't matter how many times she climbed up the oak, she always paused when she saw the heart he carved into their tree and their initials inside of it. 'I miss you so much, Peeta. I miss sitting with you and talking with you and feeling your hand in mine. I wish you were here with me,' she thought to herself. 'Snap out of it, Katniss.' She jumped down from the tree intending on telling Prim there was no nest to be found, but the sound of Peeta's voice took her completely by surprise.*

*"Find what you were looking for?" He asked her, knowing she was searching for a bird's nest that didn't exist.*

*She practically jumped out of her skin at the sight of Peeta. He materialized out of thin air as though her wish to see him could make him magically appear. "What are you..." She scanned the area for her sister. "Where's Prim?"*

*"My brother is walking her home." Peeta gave her a sly smile.*

"Your brother?" She had no clue why Peeta's brother was in that area, it's not like it was popular. That's one of the many reasons Katniss and Peeta went there. Privacy had been a huge factor in their secret relationship prior to the arena. "Why is your brother walking her home?"

"It was the only way I could get you alone," Peeta grinned.

"We shouldn't **be** alone together." Katniss' first reaction was to turn and run away from him, her second, to give Prim a piece of her mind, but it was her third that she went with when she saw what Peeta was carrying. "What's that?" She gestured to the basket in Peeta's hand with her chin.

"That..." Peeta smiled brightly. "...is our lunch."

"Lunch? I'm not having lunch with you, Peeta." She told herself to leave. To walk away from him, but her eyes were glued to Peeta as he began to unpack the basket. His muscular form was back and Katniss took a moment to appreciate it.

Peeta flicked the thin checkered blanket into the air and let it land on the ground. He set out the plates Effie had ordered for him and hoped for the best. "Why not?" He asked, knowing what the answer was.

Katniss looked over her shoulders to see if anyone was listening. "Do I really need to explain it to you?"

"Oh, I know why you **think** we shouldn't eat lunch together, but I've decided I'm sick of our arrangement and I want to go back to the way things were." He pulled out the food items the Capitol attendant delivered just an hour ago and took the lid off of the still warm pot.

*Katniss took notice of everything Peeta had set out beneath the tree. He had recreated their picnic from the Games right down to the china. "I...I can't stay here with you." 'Then move, Katniss,' she thought to herself. 'Leave right now before he talks you into staying. Like you know he will.'*

*Peeta stood up and took a couple of steps towards her. "I've been thinking...what if we went back to keeping us a secret? If we...snuck around like we did before the Games?" Peeta started walking around Katniss in a slow and deliberate circle as if stalking her like prey. "We'd be safe if we stayed out of sight and this place is pretty secluded."*

*"Nothing is out of sight for the Capitol." The offer was tempting. Katniss had thought about suggesting the very same thing to him multiple times before talking herself out of it. Why she talked herself out of it, she currently didn't know. The aroma of the lamb stew combined with Peeta's persuasive voice was overwhelmingly tempting her to give in to his suggestion.*

*"The woods are safe," Peeta stopped walking and stood behind her. "We could meet in the woods. Maybe you could teach me how to shoot a bow and arrow or climb a tree. You told me in the elevator shaft that you'd do those things. Remember, Katniss?"*

*His voice was hypnotic. Her heart, which had been racing with fear a moment ago, was now beating uncontrollably with excitement. 'They could sneak into the woods and meet. She and Gale did it on Sundays. Why not take a few days out of the week to do the same with Peeta?' She thought to herself. "Yes, I remember, but I don't think it would be too wise to try and hide a...a...romance behind the Capitol's back."*

*"Who said anything about romance?" Peeta stepped closer to her and whispered, "I'm just hungry and looking for a friend to share my lunch. As far as the archery lessons...I'd just be collecting on a promise." He walked to the blanket and sat down. "Looks good doesn't it? I went to a lot of trouble getting this food here." He looked up at the tree then at Katniss. "You did say you wanted to eat lamb stew under your favorite oak tree when you got home..." Peeta scooped out a helping of the stew onto the plate across from his as an invitation to Katniss. "...I'm only helping you do what you wanted."*

*"Do you have some sort of death wish?" Katniss couldn't believe how nonchalant Peeta was being. "Do you want to get hurt, because that's what will happen if I stay here with you?"*

*"Know what I realized yesterday?" He didn't wait for her answer. "I realized that they won't do anything to us...to our families. Too many people are watching and if they tried something...they'd only be hurting themselves. They need us, Katniss. They need the Star Crossed Lovers of District Twelve."*

*"Peeta, this is dangerous," she warned him as she stepped closer to the picnic blanket.*

*"It's just lunch." He removed the last of the items he had in the basket, two individual sized goat cheese and apple tarts and set them down next to the plates. "I even baked for the occasion."*

*"We shouldn't..."*

*"They're not going to do anything to us for eating." Peeta lifted a fork and held it out to her. "Everybody's got to eat."*

*"I don't know, Peeta." Her resolve was starting to wane. Peeta could be right, after all. The Capitol probably wouldn't do anything to them*



*for simply sharing a meal. And what are the chances they have listening devices around the tree? Katniss had been amongst those branches a million times and had never seen a thing.*

*"Effie will be very disappointed if you don't eat it." Peeta urged her to take the fork. "She had to do some serious work to get this delivered on the right day...not to mention how difficult it was to get the china."*

*Katniss knelt down and took the fork out of his hand and lifted the bread plate up. "I don't remember the plates being this...pretty."*

*"These aren't the same plates," Peeta smiled to himself as he watched Katniss take her first bite of stew.*

*"Mmmm," she closed her eyes and let the flavors play out on her tongue.*

*"I chose a different pattern." Once Peeta had found out that the original china pattern that was sent into them during the Games had been from a sponsor's wedding, he didn't find them as appealing. "Besides...these suit you."*

*"What?" Katniss was lost in the food.*

*Peeta chuckled at her and said, "The china pattern...it suits you."*

*Katniss looked at the bread plate she was still holding in her hand and examined it. The images were around the edges of the plate only. It was like a scene from the woods. Robins gave the appearance of being in mid-flight, ribbons trailing from their beaks with various shades of flowers, yellow, gold and orange on leaves of green. "I like it." Katniss smiled and said, "Now **this** is a plate."*

*Peeta let out a laugh and thought, 'it's good to see you smile again, Katniss.' His plan was simple. Keep her talking and not thinking. If she got lost in her thoughts it would be the end of their lunch date.*

*"Thanks for helping me with my art supplies the other day. That box was a bit...clunky."*

*"I could tell." Katniss bit into her roll. "It took two delivery men to bring it into our house. I don't know why I thought you could carry it back to your house by yourself."*

*"Normally I'd have no problem with that, but..." Peeta tapped on his leg. "...I'm still getting used to this thing."*

*She had been worried about how he was dealing with his leg ever since Prim had said she saw him struggling to get up from the ground. "Does it..." she had no clue how to ask him about it. "Um...does it give you a lot of problems?"*

*Peeta gave it a thought, 'Do I tell her the truth or not?' He opted for the truth. "Sometimes. There are times when..." Peeta cleared his throat. "It gets oversensitive at times. Not often, but there are moments when it feels like my foot is asleep."*

*"Well, that's good. I mean...everybody's feet fall asleep. So your leg is acting normal."*

*"Yes, but does your foot stay that way for fifteen or twenty minutes?"*

*"Ouch," Katniss made a painful face. "I can't stand it when it feels that way for fifteen seconds. I don't even want to imagine what it would feel like for fifteen minutes."*

*"Like I said, it rarely happens." Peeta shrugged a shoulder. "The thing that really bothers me is when I catch my foot on something. That drives me crazy."*

*"Everybody does that too. Madge is a born klutz. She's constantly tripping on things."*

*"Madge?" Peeta knew Katniss had been spending more time with the girl since coming home. Prim had told him. "How is she?"*

*"Oh, she's fine." Katniss felt like a pig. She was almost shoveling the warm stew and wild rice into her mouth. "She...mmmm...mmmm..."*

*Peeta smiled and said, "Finish chewing. Then answer."*

*Katniss nodded, chewed and swallowed. "Sorry. This is just so good."*

*"Wait till you taste my tart."*

*"I'm looking forward to it." Katniss graced him with a smile.*

*"So...you were saying...about Madge." Peeta encouraged her to finish updating him on the mayor's daughter.*

*"Oh, yeah. She's doing good. Says school is pretty much the same. She and Delly are even eating lunch together every day."*

*"Get out of here," this came as a surprise to Peeta. "Delly and Madge eating together because they want to? I was sure Madge couldn't stand Delly."*

*"Everybody loves Delly, Peeta. She's just about the friendliest soul there is."*

*Peeta started to laugh to himself. "Remember when you were jealous of her because you found out she gave me my first kiss?"*

*Katniss squinted her eyes at him and said with an edge to her voice, "Yes."*

*"That was pretty funny."*

*"No it wasn't." Katniss had to fight to keep the grin off of her face. Her reaction to Delly Cartwright being Peeta's first kiss was quite humorous now that she thought about it. "You made me resent Delly by telling me about that."*

*"Yeah, but it was worth it," Peeta knew he'd have to change the topic so Katniss wouldn't get upset with him. "So...how's Gale?"*

*Katniss' eyes flew to Peeta's. "Why?"*

*"Huh?"*

*"Why are you asking about Gale?" Katniss grew worried. "Did you talk to him? Have you seen him? What did he tell you?" She had hoped Peeta wouldn't find out about the kiss they had shared in the woods.*

*Peeta sensed that Gale was going to be a touchy topic. "I have hardly said two words to him since we've been back. You're still friends, right?"*

*"Yeah...I guess." Gale hadn't really been much of a conversationalist when they went hunting on Sundays, but Katniss preferred his quiet to hunting alone.*

*"I'm simply inquiring about your friend." Peeta shrugged. "It's up to you whether or not you want to tell me."*

*Katniss gave it a second then said, "He's working in the mines now. I only see him on Sundays."*

*Peeta knew this, Prim kept him informed on everything Katniss was up to. "Bet he hates that."*

*"He hasn't said much of anything about it, but I'm sure he does. I'd hate it. Working in the place where your father died..." Katniss felt a shiver go up her spine. "I don't know how he does it."*

*"Family has always been a powerful motivation for Gale. He takes his role as the man of the house very seriously." Peeta actually admired those qualities in Gale.*

*"Yes, he does."*

*Their plates were quickly emptying and Peeta was concerned Katniss would jump up and leave the moment she was through. "Want some more?"*

*"Yes," she grinned. "But I don't want to eat all of your food."*

*"I got it for you," Peeta knew he shouldn't have said that, but it came out.*

*"Peeta..." Katniss looked away from him. "...we can't hide it...you and me...you...we could get in a lot of trouble."*

*"Only if they find out," Peeta dished out more stew for Katniss.*

*"Do you honestly think we can keep it from them? Chances are someone somewhere will be talking about our lunch by dinner time."*

*"No one's going to say a word." Peeta dipped his roll into some gravy. "My brother isn't going to say a thing and Prim..."*

*"Yes. Prim." Katniss glared at Peeta. "What were you thinking involving my sister in this little game of yours?"*

*'Time to have Prim's back,' he thought. "Prim has your best interest at heart, Katniss. She'd never do anything if she thought it would hurt you, so don't blame this on her."*

*"I'm not. I'm placing all the blame on you." The corner of her mouth lifted in a little grin. "You're very persuasive."*

*"I try." Peeta gave her a huge smile.*

*"You don't try. You succeed," Katniss laughed. "Otherwise I'd be at home lecturing my sister for walking off with your brother."*

*"Don't lecture her, okay?" Peeta reached out and placed his hand on Katniss'. "She was just doing me a favor."*

*Katniss let the feeling of his hand on hers seep through her skin, memorizing the feel of it, and then pulled her hand gently away from his. "I won't lecture her, but she won't be getting off Scot free either."*

*"Want to have lunch with me again tomorrow?" Peeta asked. "I thought if I just came out and asked you I wouldn't have to use Prim as bait again." Katniss laughed. "I'm just looking out for the girl."*

*"No," her laugh was dying down. "I'm hunting with Gale tomorrow."*

*"So what?" Peeta leaned back on his hands and said, "Don't you eat while you hunt?"*

*"Yes, but..."*

*"But? I could pack a few sandwiches...make some of that rose hip tea you like so much...I could make some cookies or something..." Peeta*

*sat up and looked at her. "Have lunch with me tomorrow, Katniss. Please?"*

*She shook her head slowly. Katniss wanted to say yes, the Capitol wouldn't see them if they were in the woods, but... "What about Gale? Am I supposed to just ditch him?"*

*"Yes," Peeta said with a straight face.*

*"I usually pack lunch for me and Gale when we hunt."*

*"Don't eat it."*

*"We don't finish up until early afternoon."*

*"I'll eat a late breakfast."*

*"If they found out..." Katniss lifted her worry brow.*

*"They won't. I'll be very sneaky." Peeta said encouragingly.*

*"Let me think about it, okay?" She berated herself for even allowing the thought of hiding behind the Capitol's back, but it was a chance to spend time with him like she had before. "We can't go back to what we had before. It would be too dangerous."*

*"How about friends? Can we be friends, Katniss?" The last time Peeta asked her that question she said, yes. He was hoping for the same. "I miss you...miss my friend," Peeta said honestly. "I know Gale's your best friend, but you...you were mine and I really need a friend to talk to."*

*"You were mine too," she said softly while staring at the tart. Peeta's hand appeared in front of her eyes and pushed the pastry closer to her.*

*"Think about it." Things were getting awfully intense and there was a danger that Katniss would lose herself in thought. "Hey," his voice brightened. "If you say yes, then I can ply you with cheese buns."*

*"You already do that," Katniss grinned at him.*

*"Okay, how about cakes? I haven't had any reason to make a cake since I've been back, so how about I promise to bring you a personal sized cake with each meal?" Peeta wagged his brows at her. "The first one can be a chocolate banana cake with marshmallow frosting."*

*Katniss eyes grew huge. "I've never heard of such a thing. What's marshmallow frosting?"*

*"That's because I just thought of it," Peeta admitted. "And it's pretty much sugar turned into a gooey..." he started using his hands to describe it, moving them about as though they were covered in the sticky confection. "They're like tiny white pillows." Then he remembered, "They were floating around in the hot chocolate we had when we were at the Tribute Center."*

*"Oooh. I liked those. Can you do that? Can you bake a cake like that?"*

*"Don't know." He honestly didn't. "But it'll be fun trying."*

*Katniss took a bite out of her tart and made a very loud noise, "Mmmmmm. Oh, this is heaven."*

*Peeta smiled at her and said, "Glad you like it."*

*After packing everything up, Peeta offered to walk her home, but Katniss reminded him, that they'd be seen if they walked into the village together. Before she left she said, "There's a hole in the fence by the Hob. We usually end our day there."*



*She didn't come right out and say she'd meet him, but he understood her meaning. Katniss was willing to take a chance on him again and Peeta wasn't going to let her down.*

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The shock of cold water dumped on his head brought Haymitch out of his stoupor. Katniss was standing above him with an empty container in her hand, "What the hell?" Haymitch sat upright. "Son of a bitch. Damn..." He glared at Katniss and spat out, "What are you doing?"

She stood back and sweetly said, "You told me to wake you up an hour before the cameramen came." Haymitch wanted to wipe the satisfied grin off of her face.

"What?" He asked as if he had no clue what she was talking about.

"Hey," Katniss put the empty water container down. "It was your idea. Not mine."

"Why am I all wet?" Water was dripping down his neck and soaking into his shirt.

"I couldn't shake you awake." Katniss crossed her arms and said, "Look, if you wanted to be babied, you should have asked Peeta."

"Asked me what?" Peeta came into the room and set a loaf of sourdough bread down on the table. He held his hand out to Haymitch and accepted the knife his mentor slept with every night.

"Asked you to wake me without giving me pneumonia." Haymitch took off his shirt and began drying himself off.

"I make no promises." Peeta grinned at Katniss. "I can't promise I won't cause you bodily harm the next time I wake you." Peeta had planned on making Haymitch pay for the black eye he received when the mentor punched him after being roused from his sleep, but then he saw the black eye Haymitch had been sporting and heard his mentor complaining about 'the girl.' There was no need for Peeta to seek revenge on Haymitch, but every now and then he'd threaten the man if he didn't wake up by saying he'd send Katniss in to blacken the other eye. Peeta cleaned Haymitch's knife and sliced a piece of bread off for him. "Would you like some?" Peeta asked Katniss.

"No," Katniss looked at the bread and recognized it. She had been seeing these loaves everywhere she went that morning. At the Hob, where she made her trades, Greasy Sae was selling paper thin slices of it to go with the stew she made that day. Ripper, the woman that sold the white liquor Haymitch was so fond of, had a loaf of it behind her counter to take home with her. And Hazelle had two loaves of it, one of them partially eaten, sitting on her kitchen table. "I ate at the Hob," Katniss replied. "But thank you," she said as an afterthought.

Peeta took a bite out of a slice of bread and smiled at her. "You're welcome."

"It was good though...the bread. I had a piece at the Hob."

"Thanks. My parents made it."

"I know." Katniss hadn't realized what she said.

"How do you know I didn't make it?" Peeta asked her.

"Oh...uh...I just figured you wouldn't be baking today," she covered.

Peeta nodded at her and said, "You figured right."

"I better go." She headed for Haymitch's window which she often entered and exited through.

"Katniss. Wait a second." Peeta gave Haymitch a look that said, 'get out of here' and walked up to her.

"I'm going to change," Haymitch grumbled as he left the two of them together.

"Make sure you bathe, Haymitch," Peeta called out to him and got a wave of his hand in response. "Sometimes I'm not sure who's taking care of who." He chuckled as he walked towards Haymitch's front door. "I'll walk you out."

Katniss' palms were sweating profusely. Her hands were itching to hold his. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah...I just wanted to say..." Peeta stopped and turned to her. "Katniss, we can do this." There was urgency in his voice. "We can be together again...in public...in private...wherever we want."

"Peeta we've talked about this. They're not going to change their mind just because we're doing this tour."

"What if I told you they didn't care one way or another? If I said, we can just live our lives and never have to worry about the Capitol again? Then what?"

"But we can't..."

Peeta interrupted her. "Just answer me. *If*, Katniss. If that was a possibility, would you do it? Would you spend your life with me? Loving me?"

The desire to scream out, yes was overbearing. "We don't live in that kind of a world, Peeta." She walked to the front door and turned to him. "But if we did...yes. I would."

Peeta's shoulders slumped as he watched her walk out of Haymitch's house and into the falling snow. He turned and ran through his mentor's house looking for the man, who was not in his bathroom taking a bath, but on the edge of his bed sipping white liquor. "We need to talk."

"I'm gonna take a bath. I just needed to wake up first."

"Haymitch." Peeta moved in closer and said very quietly. "Someone was waiting for me in my spare bedroom when I got home this morning. You know...the one I turned into an art studio." Peeta watched as his mentor absorbed the severity of the news.

Katniss slid her boots through the snow and stared at the ground as she walked. She wished she and Peeta could live the way he dreamed of. Out of the reach of the Capitol. Out of the public eye.

"There you are," her mother took her coat from her as she stomped the snow off of her boots. "You have a visitor."

Katniss lifted her eyes to see the color washed out of her mother's face. "I thought they weren't due until noon." She tried to act as normal as possible. "Did Cinna come early?"

"No, Katniss, it's..."

"Follow me, please, Miss. Everdeen." A tall man, dressed in a dark suit stood in their living room. He gestured down the hall and said, "This way please."

"Probably more instructions for the tour," Katniss tried to ease her mother's worries, but she knew that there was nothing left for them to go over. 'We're not even going to make it to the tour. They're going to kill me...us now. The Capitol found out about me and Peeta sneaking around in the woods for the past few months and now we're going to pay the price.' The moment she saw President Snow sitting in her study, she knew her fears were about to become a reality.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter 3,**

### **a hunger games**

### **fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Two: Snow's Storm**

**(Insert evil laugh here) President Snow is paying a visit to District Twelve in this chapter! I wonder what he'll say to our favorite pair? Some of my favorite characters will be entering the story soon. Yay for Effie, Cinna and Portia! Much thanks to S and A, both of whom I'd be lost without. Thank you to all of you that take**

**the time to read this story and write a review. Let us now read the next installment of...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Haymitch hopped up from the edge of his bed, suddenly sober, and held his finger out to Peeta to silence him. He went downstairs, threw a jacket and shoes on with Peeta following on his heels. Haymitch took him as far away from his house as possible without leaving the village. They were at the edge of his backyard and the beginning of Peeta's. He whispered to Peeta, "What do you mean you had a visitor?" Haymitch could tell from the expression on Peeta's face when he had told him someone was in his art studio, it was something to worry over.

"Just that," Peeta said quietly. "I walked into my house and..." Peeta cringed at the scent of blood that was still burning his nostrils. "Snow was there. He was walking around in my studio, looking at my paintings."

Haymitch felt as though he was going to lose the little bit of alcohol and bread that was in his stomach. "Tell me everything, kid. Don't leave a detail out no matter how small."

Peeta thought back to that morning after he left the bakery.

*"Morning, Sae," Peeta smiled at the woman, who could've easily passed for a man if it weren't for the breasts. "I brought you something." He handed her two loaves of sourdough bread.*

*"How much do you want for it?" Sae asked with a sly grin on her face. Peeta never charged for anything he brought to the Hob.*

*He gave her his standard answer, "You'll have to teach me how to cook something." Sae could make anything taste good...or palatable, considering the ingredients she had to work with on a daily basis; Peeta was impressed with her culinary skills.*

*"Anything in particular you want to cook?"*

*"It's coming on cranberry season and I've always been partial to those. So something with cranberries." Sae never went to Peeta's home to cook, but she would give him an idea of how long to bake...roast...sear the meats he would buy. Peeta always came up with the ingredient suggestion though. He was afraid Sae would suggest wild dog or stray cat and he wanted to avoid those at all cost. "Maybe a stuffing with cranberries in it."*

*"Stuffed poultry would be the traditional way to go in the fall," she said.*

*Peeta gave her a sly grin and said, "Since when have I been a stickler for tradition when it comes to food?"*

*Sae let out a little laugh and said, "You buying some meat from Rooba for it?"*

*"Yeah." He leaned against her counter and said, "I might even have her order something special for me."*

*"Why not wait and see what's being served at those fancy dinners you're going to? Betcha they've got birds stuffed with liquid gold at the Capitol." Sae let out a little laugh.*

*Peeta gave her a smile and said, "Sae, I like the way you think."*

*"Don't blame ya. I'm smarter than most." She gave Peeta a wink and said, "Enjoy the food and tell me all about it when ya get back."*

*Peeta grinned and said, "Will do, Sae. See ya in a few weeks." He headed for the woman that sold Haymitch his white liquor. Something he had been stockpiling at his house since Haymitch went through a bout of withdrawal. "Morning, Ripper. How are you doing today?"*

*"Fine, Peeta. Got to get ready early today. Who knows if we'll get extra Peacekeepers in the district with that train coming and all those Capitol folks on it."*

*"Then I won't keep you." He reached in the bag and pulled out a loaf of bread. "This is for you to bring home and I don't want to find out you sold any of it either."*

*She picked up the loaf of bread and sniffed at it. "Smells funny."*

*"It's called sourdough. It has a bit of a zing to it, but knowing you...you'll love it."*

*"Thanks, Peeta." She put it behind her and reached for a bottle of liquor. "Let me give you something for this."*

*"No. It's a gift, but I will take a few bottles off of your hands." Peeta reached into his pocket and took out the appropriate amount of coins and placed them on the table she had set up.*

*"Much appreciated, Peeta." Ripper took the coins and put them in the little tin box she used while doing business at the Hob.*

*"Anytime, Ripper. I'll see you when I get back." He waived and made his way out of the Hob and headed towards the Hawthorne residence. 'Gale should be at the mines by now,' he thought to himself.*



*Hazelle peered through the curtain and smiled when she saw Peeta standing outside. "Good morning to you," she said as she held her door open. "Come in from the snow."*

*"No thank you." Peeta knew the rest of the kids would be up and getting ready for school soon. "I'm in a hurry. I've got to get home."*

*"Big day, huh?"*

*"Yup," Peeta reached into his bag and pulled out two loaves of bread leaving one for himself and Haymitch to share. "Victory Tour," he sighed.*

*"Don't worry on it too much, Peeta. You'll get old before your time." Hazelle took the bread from him. "I appreciate the bread. It smells wonderful."*

*"Thanks." Peeta could see the warmth of her home. It was by no means, fancy, but it gave off a feeling of love and comfort. A wave of jealousy went through him. 'I bet Gale hears his mother tell him she loves him all the time,' the thought caused him to ache in the pit of his stomach. "I better get going. I'll bring my rags by when I get back." Hazelle refused to take anything from Peeta without some form of payment so she washed the cloths he used while painting. He never brought her the really soiled ones, he didn't want her to try and scrub off paint that would never come out, so, he brought her rags were mostly chemical stains and droplets of paint.*

*"I can send one of the boys if you like?"*

*"That's okay, Hazelle. Walking does my leg good." He had gotten much better on it since making trips into the woods. The uneven terrain provided him a good workout for his prosthetic. "See ya."*

*As he walked home he imagined what life was like in the Hawthorne house. A mother that took care of her kids...loved them and worked her fingers to the bone to provide for them. It was such a stark contrast to his own mom. She worked her children harder than she worked herself and Peeta's father was the housekeeper in their family. His mother just complained that things weren't done right. As he got to his house he kicked his boots against the doorframe to get the snow off of them. The smell smacked him in the face the moment he opened the door. It was unnatural and all too familiar. Peeta knew the scent the second he smelled it. It was the same scent they used in the Capitol showers. Roses. The smell of blood hit him as he followed it up the stairs and saw a man standing in the doorway of his art studio. "May I help you?" Peeta could tell by his mode of dress that he wasn't from around there. He was from the Capitol. The man didn't say anything, but gestured with his arm as if Peeta should go into his studio. "Are you from the tour?" Peeta glared at him.*

*"No. He's with me," President Snow said as he stared at a portrait of Katniss standing at the lip of the Cornucopia getting ready to shoot her arrow into Cato's skull.*

*The sight of the man who ruined his life gave Peeta pause. He was standing amongst the paintings that had once held messages from the rebellion. The ink that showed up after adding chemicals and heat to them disappeared after a minute or so, but Peeta still worried that Snow may have discovered that the rebels were communicating via his art supplies. "President Snow," Peeta said in a welcoming tone. "Welcome to my home." Peeta stood as naturally as possible, not wanting to show the man the fear that was coursing through him.*

*Snow walked around his room looking at the different works of art and said, "I had heard you were quite gifted, but I never imagined someone from so lowly a district as Twelve could produce such..." he*

*stood next to a picture of the mutt version of Gale, "...works of art. I think this is my favorite." It didn't surprise Peeta that the president would like the picture of the mutation he created. It was snarling and there were drops of saliva dripping off of its bared teeth. The eyes were unmistakably Seam grey, its hair was shiny and black; its claws about ready to rip open anything that got in its way. "You must have enjoyed painting this one quite a bit." Snow turned to Peeta and smiled. "I imagine that's how you view Miss. Everdeen's...cousin."*

*Peeta wanted to cringe at Snow calling Gale Katniss' cousin that way. It was obvious to both of them he knew they weren't related. "I enjoyed the painting, but not necessarily the subject."*

*Snow walked to a picture of Katniss standing high on a cliff and ran his hand around the edge of it. "Are you telling me you didn't care for this particular subject?"*

*Just having Snow close to an image of Katniss made Peeta's blood boil. "President Snow, my paintings will be on display at the Capitol shortly, so I know you didn't make this trip to view them. Why don't we forgo the pleasantries and you can tell me what the honor of this visit is for." Peeta wanted to scream at him and say, 'What do you want from me?' but that would never do when talking to the president.*

*Snow turned to him and said, "Fair enough." His expression turned from pleasant to pure hatred. "You're a very smart young man, Mr. Mellark. Smart enough to know why I'm here, I think."*

*Peeta nodded and said, "The berries."*

*President Snow confirmed Peeta's suspicions with a raise of his brows and a sniff. "Yes, the berries have caused a bit of a problem for me, but that's not the only thing I have a problem with." Snow gave him a discerning look and said, "Can you guess what the other is?"*

*Peeta was petrified the president was going to say Katniss was his problem. He tried to focus the issues towards himself. "Since you're standing in my studio, I'm assuming I would be the other problem."*

*"And why would you think that, Mr. Mellark?"*

*"Why don't you tell me, President Snow?" Peeta asked growing weary of their verbal dance.*

*The president gave him a smile that turned into a snarl. "You caused a lot of trouble for me in that arena with your...rebellious acts. Declaring your love on national television for a fellow tribute...apologizing to the dead tributes with each of your kills...making a fool out of more worthy adversaries..."*

*"I'm guessing you mean the Careers?"*

*"The Careers? Is that how you view them, Mr. Mellark?" Peeta gave him a slight tilt of his head. "I'm surprised to hear this coming from you. Or don't you value their lives enough to refer to them by their names?" His statement caused Peeta's stomach to churn. "Perhaps you're more like them than you think."*

*"I'm nothing like them." Peeta looked Snow squarely in the eyes and said, "I'll never be like them."*

*"Never say never." Snow stood directly in front of Peeta with an intimidating look on his face, but Peeta held the man's gaze until Snow broke eye contact with him. "Where was I? Oh, yes...all the trouble you caused me. Mr. Mellark, I know you were more than willing to eat those berries and die for Miss. Everdeen, which leads me to believe that you'd be willing to accept my offer."*

*"What offer?" Peeta was hesitant to accept anything from Snow. "The last time you made an offer it almost got Katniss killed."*

*"True. Ultimately her going to the feast saved your life. However, this offer will not put your Miss. Everdeen's life in danger. On the contrary, it will save her life...and yours."*

*"You won't kill us. There are too many people watching us. They'd have too many questions."*

*Snow turned to Peeta and said in a vicious tone, "Oh, you're quite popular...right now." Snow's pupils dilated as he informed Peeta, "But your fame will fade in time and then..." Snow took a few steps around Peeta's room and said, "You have a choice Mr. Mellark. You can continue to stir up trouble while on this Victory Tour with your...acts of compassion and selflessness." He said, with repulsion dripping from his voice. "Or you and Katniss can play nice for the cameras, come home and never worry about the Capitol again." Snow glared at Peeta and said, "You'll never have to be a mentor. You'll never have to leave this Godforsaken district. Both of you and your families will never have to worry about a thing. You can..." Snow arched his brow and said, "...live happily ever after."*

*"Forgive me if I'm a bit hesitant to accept your offer, but...why? Why would you let me and Katniss off the hook for everything you think we did to you?"*

*"Perhaps I gave you too much credit? Can't you figure it out Mr. Mellark?"*

*"You want to stop people from thinking about our...what did you call them? Oh, yeah...rebellious acts. You're afraid that people will start to follow our lead and stand up to the Capitol. And you're under the impression that no one will ask about us after we come back here? No*

*one would wonder where we were when the Games come each year?"*

*"Oh, they'll ask, but won't I look like a sympathetic president by informing them that the Star Crossed Lovers are off living their lives away from the cameras? Think about it, Mr. Mellark. You could marry that girl...have children..."*

*"Watch them get reaped," Peeta said with anger in his voice.*

*"I could arrange it so they never have to see the inside of an arena." Peeta's eyes flew to Snow's. "You could go about your everyday lives. I'll even turn a blind eye to Miss. Everdeen's frequenting the woods." Snow licked his overly puffy lips and the stench of blood curdled Peeta's stomach. "Wouldn't you like that, Mr. Mellark? A guarantee that you and everyone you love will never have to be a part of the Games?"*

*"Everyone I love?"*

*"Wouldn't it be a shame if that sweet little girl, Primrose, had her name picked for the Quell? I don't know what the Gamemakers had planned when they created the Quarter Quell. The stipulations for those Games were created nearly seventy-five years ago, but I can only imagine that one of the Games will reap the tributes from the families of victors. And since your brothers are too old for the Games now, I suppose one of her young cousins would be reaped along side of her."*

*There it was. Peeta was waiting for the threat. He was sure Snow would threaten to kill Katniss, but this was so much worse. He was threatening to put Prim in the arena and have Katniss watch her fight for her life against one of Gale's little brothers. It would be easier if he just killed Katniss. "How do I know you'll hold up your end of the bargain?"*

*"You have my word, Mr. Mellark and a president is only as good as his word."*

*"That's not good enough," Peeta turned on him. "If I agree to this...I'll want you to make it official somehow. Katniss' whole family...including the Hawthorne's. My family...our kids if we ever have any, her family's children...all of us will be off limits. Including our team from District Twelve. Our stylists...prep teams...Effie, Haymitch...hands off of everyone." Peeta had a demanding edge to his voice.*

*The president scowled at him, much like Katniss and said, "You are too smart for your own good Mr. Mellark. Anyone else would've jumped on the offer the moment I made it."*

*"Well, I'm not anyone else. Take it or leave it," Peeta found a streak of courage he never knew existed.*

*"It seems I have no alternative. If you and Miss. Everdeen keep the people of the districts focused on your...love," he said with disgust. "And not your rebellious streak...we have a deal."*

*Peeta looked at the hand Snow held out, contemplating shaking it. "I'm not agreeing to anything yet. I'm sure you'll understand if I take some time to think it over." He knew he'd have to tell Haymitch about this. Peeta's actions would stop the rebellion in its tracks.*

*"Of course," Snow dropped his hand. "I assume you'll have made your choice by the time you go on tour."*

*"You'll know my answer by then."*

*"Don't disappoint me, Mr. Mellark," Snow warned him. "No acts of heroism, no words of remorse towards the dead tributes. Oh, you can keep it simple, I'm sorry for your loss and what not, but nothing overly*

*emotional. You will not do what you did in the arena. You will not make a public stand against the Capitol."*

*"I wasn't doing that in the arena. I was simply fighting to keep Katniss alive."*

*"Then I suggest you keep fighting, Mr. Mellark." Snow walked to the door and said, "I'll be watching...closely."*

Haymitch kept running his hand over his face. "I'm assuming you made a choice, boy."

"Not yet." Peeta looked Haymitch in his bloodshot eyes. "This tour gives the rebels a chance to fight back. If Snow is right, then the districts are waiting for Katniss and me to take a public stand, but if we did anything like that..."

"Snow can kill you," Haymitch finished for him.

"Not right away, but yes and he'll take it out on her family, Haymitch."

"What about the other families, kid? What about the families that still have children going into the arena?"

"I know," Peeta hung his head down. "But I can't let them kill Prim. I can't let Katniss watch her die."

"Kid, you've got to stay focused here. Snow's asking you to do this because we got him where we want him. Imagine if you were your normal self on the tour...if you did show your compassionate side, but for someone other than Katniss? Do you know what that would do for this nation? You'd be giving them hope, kid. Showing them that one act of kindness can change Panem."



"Do you think I haven't thought about that?" Peeta whispered hoarsely. "Do you think I want to say, to hell with everyone else, I'm thinking about me and me alone? You know me better than that, Haymitch."

"I do know you, kid. So, I know that when it comes right down to it, you'll do whatever you have to do to protect Katniss, but the rebellion is the safest thing for her...for her whole family."

"Explain to me how an uprising is going to protect her and her family? There are a lot of deaths in wars too. Less people die in the arena than they do in a war."

"You're starting to sound like Snow, kid." Haymitch said.

"I'm sounding like a realist," Peeta didn't let Haymitch's insult get to him. "I need to think about this, Haymitch. Really think."

"That's what we're doing, kid. We're..."

"No, Haymitch." Peeta put up a hand to him and said, "This time I'm making the decision myself. It's my future...Katniss' future at stake here and I won't let anyone else dictate the course of our lives." He walked into his house and ran a tub. He didn't notice the white haired man leaving Katniss' house.

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Katniss stood as though ready to run for her and her family's lives. Plans of getting her mother and Prim away from the evil dictator, after all, that's what he was, raced through her mind. In the span of seconds a barrage of ideas shot through her mind. Screaming, run to her mother and Prim, throwing herself in the line of fire, which would

surely come if she tried to fight the President directly, and pleading for all of their safety came to mind.

"I think we'll make this whole situation a lot simpler by agreeing not to lie to each other. What do you think?" Snow said with his affected Capitol accent.

"Yes," Katniss said in a surprisingly steady voice. "I think that would save a lot of time."

"I was advised to stay away from you Miss. Everdeen. I was told that you would be difficult, but you're not planning on being difficult are you?"

"No," she answered sharply.

"I didn't think so. Anyone that would go to such lengths to preserve her life and the life of the boy she loves would never be interested in throwing it all away. Then there's your family to consider. Your mother...sister and..." He looks at her and hissed, "...all those cousins." She could tell by the accusatory tone in his voice that he knew the Hawthorne's were no more related to her than he was. "Let's sit, shall we?"

Katniss found it odd being invited to take a seat in her own home, but she followed his lead. "What brings you here?" She asked as she sat on one of the high-backed chairs in their study.

"Your stylist turned out to be prophetic in his wardrobe choice, Katniss Everdeen, Girl on Fire. You have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow into an inferno that destroys Panem. We have a problem, Miss. Everdeen. A problem that began the moment you volunteered for your sister..." Snow sat upright and followed up with, "...when you pulled out those poisonous berries in the arena."

President Snow lifted the corner of his puffy lips in a sly and grotesque smile. "If the Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane, had had any sense, he would've blown you to bits right then and there. Unfortunately he had a...sentimental streak, so here you are. Tell me, Katniss," he sounded like a snake as he hissed the end of her name. "Can you guess where he is?"

Katniss nodded her head, knowing that Seneca Crane was dead simply by the way Snow had said it. "I can only assume he had to answer for his actions."

"You're a very smart girl." Snow leered at her. "After that, what was I to do, but allow the two of you to play out your romance for the Capitol...the nation if you will." Snow tapped his finger against the arm of his chair. "Until you got home that is." Snow smiled a lecherous grin. "I must say, I've quite enjoyed watching the two of you suffer since your return to the district. However, it seems your separation is causing quite a mood change in District Twelve." She could see the look of hatred on Snow's face. "If one of their own can defy the Capitol and walk away from it, unscathed, what's to stop them from doing the same? What's to prevent, say, an uprising in your hometown? In other districts?"

"Uprising? We haven't had any uprisings." Katniss hadn't heard anything about such a thing in their district. She wondered if they were occurring in other ones. "Have there been some...uprisings?" She half hoped and half feared his answer.

"Not yet, but they'll follow if the course of things don't change. Uprisings have been known to lead to revolutions. Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many deaths you'd be responsible for? Whatever problems people have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short

period of time, the entire system would collapse." Snow rubbed at a spot on his forehead as though there was pain shooting through it.

"It must be fragile if a handful of berries can bring it down." Katniss had no clue where that statement came from, but she enjoyed the look of surprise that flashed across Snow's face and the hint of bravery in her voice.

"It is fragile, but not in the way you suppose."

Katniss turned her head when there was a knock on the door and the Capitol man said, "Her mother wants to know if you want tea."

"Yes," he said brightly. "I would like tea."

Katniss silently hoped her mother poisoned it as she watched her mom walk into the room with a tray. "Where would you like it?" 'I can think of the perfect place,' thought Katniss dryly.

"Set it just here, please." He pat at the center of the desk he was sitting in front of. "How lovely," Katniss took notice of the delicately iced cookies her mother had provided on a small plate, knowing Peeta had made them. "It's funny how often people forget that presidents need to eat too."

"Can I get you something else? I can cook something more substantial if you're hungry?" 'And poison that,' Katniss thought to herself.

"This will do. Thank you."

Katniss watched as her mother left the room and felt a sense of relief when she was out of the president's direct line of sight. "I didn't mean

to start any uprisings." Katniss continued their conversation where it had left off. "I had no clue what was going on in the other districts."

"Of course you wouldn't know the goings on in other districts, but somehow they know what's going on here. It seems you and your...fellow tribute are still causing quite a ruckus."

"We haven't done anything." Katniss wanted to let the president know that she and Peeta had followed their unspoken order and stayed apart...for the most part. "Peeta and I barely see one another," she informed him with resentment in her eyes.

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Snow paused and said, "It seems many are aware of that."

Ice was coursing through her veins when she said, "We only did what we thought you wanted."

Snow smiled and said, "It is what I wanted, Miss. Everdeen. I wanted you both to suffer for your impetuous actions in the arena, but I never stopped to consider that the news of your separation would spread past District Twelve. I should've allowed you to continue your...love affair; instead I chose to revel in your misery. And now I'm the one that looks the fool."

"Why do you look like a fool?" Katniss could only guess at what his answer would be, but she always thought their president to be thoughtless.

"It seems you two are giving off the impression of faking your romance in the arena. Do you know what message that is sending out?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "You might as well have worn a sign that said we defied the Capitol." He paused before saying, "Now, I can't blame you for that. I shall take responsibility for your actions when you

came home, but only to a point. It seems I need to share that blame." He lifted a cookie and examined it. "These are lovely. Did your mother make these?"

"Peeta," Katniss looked away from the president for the first time since entering the room. She didn't even want the president to bring up his name let alone make him the topic of conversation.

"Peeta?" Snow put the cookie back down on the plate and said, "The one I share the blame with."

Katniss' eyes flew to Snow's. "For what? I was the one that took out the berries...that held them up for everyone to see," she practically hollered at him in the hopes that she'd make herself the target in order to protect Peeta.

"And he was the one that chose to pursue you after you came home. Defying the Capitol...me, once again."

"He didn't do anything wrong," Katniss could hear herself whining...pleading for Peeta's life. "He loves me. That's all. He loves me."

"I'm aware of that, but ask yourself, why would he need to hide your relationship if he's not trying to make a statement of defiance?"

"No. No. That's not what he was doing." Katniss flattened the palms of her hands against the desk in front of Snow. "He just wanted to be friends with me. That's all and we thought you'd get upset if we flaunted it around the district."

"Friends? Really?" Snow looked at her as though he knew something. "Is that what he told you?"

Katniss was ready to lie and say, no, but it was obvious President Snow was aware of everything that had happened between her and Peeta since coming back.

*She remembered that first Sunday, after Gale had left the woods, Peeta stepped out from a cluster of trees and said, "You're late."*

*Katniss turned to him and said, "Late for what?" She saw a bag strapped over his shoulder.*

*"We had a lunch date," he smiled at her.*

*"I never agreed to date you," she tried to hide her grin as she walked past him and into the woods towards the opening in the fence located next to her old house.*

*"Okay. You're late for our lunch appointment." He followed her.*

*"I already ate," she had barely picked at the leftover roast she had packed for her and Gale's lunch, she was too anxious to eat with Peeta.*

*"Then maybe we should skip lunch and go straight to desert?" The way he said it made Katniss wonder if Peeta was on the menu.*

*"Desert sounds good."*

*"Where should we go?" He caught up to her and walked side by side with her.*

*"Follow me." She led him to the spot where she and Gale met up. It was close to the exit and had plenty of covering.*

*Peeta surveyed the area and said, "This is nice." He looked out into the forest and said, "Wow, those colors are breathtaking." He placed*

*the bag down on the ground and took out two small cardboard cake boxes and a larger cake box. Then he pulled out a sketchpad and a pencil case. "Hungry?"*

*Katniss had been starving. She could've easily eaten lunch earlier, but Peeta had said he'd be bringing sandwiches with him and she had had a bite of one of them not too long ago. Prim had been eating one he made out of ham, but it had a sweet relish of some sort on it and he spread it with cheese, loaded it up with produce from his garden, and her mouth began to water at the thought of it. "Yes. I'm starving."*

*Peeta opened up the large box and pulled out a sandwich wrapped in a waxy paper. "I hope you like it. I tried something new."*

*Katniss loved it. There were thin slices of chicken breast, thick slices of bacon, a tangy sauce spread across the herbed bread, cucumbers, onions, lettuce, tomatoes and some type of sprout. "Where did you get all of this stuff?" Katniss asked as she took a huge bite.*

*"I grew most of the vegetables myself and get the rest through the grocer. I give him a list of things I'd like and he orders it. I could ask Effie to send it on the train, but..."*

*Katniss knew Peeta ordered his food items through the grocer in order to give the man business. "Well, it's delicious."*

*"Thanks," Peeta put his half eaten sandwich back in the box and turned to face the scenery. He opened his pencil boxes and went to work on a blank page of his sketchpad.*

*Katniss sat back and watched him work. The intensity in his eyes when he got lost in his art always made her stomach flop. She finished her sandwich and started poking through the smaller cake boxes. "What's in here?"*



*"Your cake," he answered without taking his eyes off of the scene before him.*

*"Can I eat it?" She wanted him to enjoy drawing, but she was completely jealous of the pencils his fingers continually gripped.*

*"Sure," he said. "There's a fork in the box."*

*Katniss opened it up and started salivating. "Prim is going to be so jealous when she finds out about this cake."*

*"I dropped a couple off at your house for your mom and her," Peeta put the sketchpad down and faced her. "I hope it turned out okay. If not...you'll just have to forget about it and dwell on how good my sandwich making skills are."*

*Katniss let out a little laugh and said, "I'm sure it's delicious." From her first bite of the sugary treat, she was in heaven. "You don't want yours, do you?" Katniss smiled at him.*

*Peeta sat back and watched her eat. "Nope. You can have it."*

*"I was just teasing." Secretly she hoped he'd give her his cake.*

*"I know, but I'm not very hungry right now. Besides, I'm going to my parents for dinner after this so I need to save some of my appetite."*

*"You're going to your parent's house?" Katniss wondered what the relationship between him and his family was like now that she had confronted his mother, but she didn't ask.*

*"I eat with them every Sunday night." Peeta took a napkin out of the bag and reached his hand out. "Stay still." Katniss felt his eyes piercing through her as he wiped some chocolate off of her face. "You had a bit of cake there," his voice had lowered down to a tender tone.*

*"Thanks," she took the used napkin that he handed her and placed it on her leg. "It's good cake."*

*"Thank you." There was an energy buzzing between them that Katniss couldn't deny. "How was your day with Gale?"*

*"Um...fine." Every time Peeta mentioned Gale Katniss felt an overwhelming sense of guilt.*

*"Has he..." Peeta moved closer to her. "Has he said anything to you...about us?"*

*"Not really." Katniss put the empty cake box down and placed the fork and napkin inside of it. "I've talked to him about you though." She had no clue why she said that.*

*"What did you tell him?" Peeta scooted closer to her.*

*"The truth." Katniss looked down at her lap and folded her hands in it. "He asked me if we were faking it in the arena after he..." She was talking way too much, but it was so easy talking to Peeta. Telling him about the things that were on her mind.*

*"After he, what?" She could feel Peeta's stare.*

*"He kissed me." She expected Peeta to get angry...jealous, but he didn't, which took her totally by surprise.*

*"I figured he'd try something since we're not exactly a couple anymore."*

*"You figured?" Katniss turned to him. "Why would you think he'd try something with me?"*

*"The same reason I gave you months ago, Katniss. He has feelings for you." Peeta cleared his throat and asked. "What did you do when he kissed you?"*

*Katniss didn't know what to tell him. She opted for the truth. "I kissed him back," her voice was filled with remorse.*

*Peeta looked off to the side and asked, "What kind of kiss was it?"*

*"Huh?"*

*He looked directly at her and Katniss couldn't figure out when he had moved so close to her. "What kind of kiss was it? Was it a friendly kiss or something...more?"*

*"I don't think we should be talking about this." Katniss couldn't tell him what had happened between her and Gale no matter how much she wanted to.*

*"Why not? We're friends, right?"*

*"I suppose, but..."*

*"But?" Peeta turned himself until he faced her straight on. "Are you afraid I might get jealous?"*

*Katniss didn't want to admit it, but she said, "Yes."*

*"I'm not jealous, Katniss. I have no reason to be." He had an ethereal look on his face.*

*"You always got jealous of Gale before. Why aren't you now?" For some reason his lack of distrust irked her.*

*"We're not romantically involved anymore so..." Peeta shrugged, as he leaned closer into her. "Besides, I know you don't have those types of feelings for Gale."*

*Suddenly Katniss found herself wanting the old Peeta back. The one that got so jealous of Gale he made Katniss jealous of Delly. "It was a...something more kiss." Her eyes were glistening as she said, "He held my face in his hands and..."*

*"Like this?" Peeta cupped her cheeks and lowered his voice down. "Is this how he held you?" He was whispering now and it was giving Katniss chills.*

*"Yes," she whispered back.*

*"Then what did he do?" The tip of Peeta's nose was touching hers.*

*"He kissed me." Katniss closed her eyes and felt her pulse pounding in her neck.*

*"Like this?" He leaned in and placed a very soft peck on her lips. "Or like this?" Katniss felt the tip of his tongue flick against her bottom lip. Despite every argument she was making with herself in that moment, she parted her lips and invited Peeta in to kiss her the way only he was allowed to. When he pulled away, she kept her eyes closed and ran her tongue over her mouth. "So?"*

*"So what?" She asked in a dreamlike voice.*

*"Is that how he kissed you?"*

*She shook her head slowly from left to right and said, "No." She opened her eyes and saw his sweet smile. "It was more like the first one." She swallowed and said, "I pushed him away though."*

*Peeta rubbed his nose against hers and asked, "Why?"*

*"Because..." Katniss lifted her hands to his head and threaded her fingers through his hair. "It didn't feel right. His lips...his hair..."*

*"What was wrong?" He breathed against her lips.*

*"It wasn't you," she whispered to him as she closed her eyes and waited for his lips to meet hers. She didn't have to wait long. It had been months since she felt so alive. Her heart was drumming hard and beating at a rapid , her stomach tightening. Her mind was racing. 'What are you doing, Katniss? You're not supposed to let him do this to you. You're supposed to keep your distance. This kiss could be the death of Peeta.' Her last thought brought her back to reality. She pulled away from him and reluctantly took her hands from his hair. "Please don't do that."*

*Peeta sat back and said, "Why not? Why can't I kiss you? I love you, Katniss."*

*"No," she stood straight up and took a step away from him. "We can't do this, Peeta," she pleaded with him. "You can't put me in this position."*

*He stood up in front of her and said, "I'm not the one putting you in this position. That would be the Capitol."*

*"Yes. The Capitol." Katniss turned away from him and said, "We've already given them more than enough to use against us. We can't give them anything more."*

*"Katniss," he placed his hand on her shoulder. "I'm going to be honest with you. I miss you."*

*"Peeta don..."*

*"Hear me out," he interrupted her before she could argue. "I miss you. Not just this part," he turned her by the shoulders to face him. "Not just kissing you...holding your hand...I miss this." He pointed back and forth between them. "I miss our friendship. I miss telling you things, hearing about your day...and I know you miss me too. I know you do."*

*Katniss walked away from him and placed her hands against a tree.*

*If she had been thinking clearly, she would've continued to lecture Peeta on his actions, but her thoughts were a jumbled mess. She was about to turn around and run deep into the woods when she felt a thump. Peeta had backed her into the tree. "I...I..."*

*He planted a foot one on each side of hers. "You?" He whispered as he braced a hand on each side of her head. He could see the panic in her eyes, but ignored it.*

*"I...I need to go." She didn't move. She could barely breathe.*

*Peeta could hear her breathing pattern change from normal to jerky spasms. "So go." He was inches away from her.*

*"You...um..." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You have to move." 'Dear, God. Don't move,' she thought to herself. 'Please don't move.'*

*He leaned in and whispered next to her ear, "I'm not going anywhere. I made that mistake once. I don't plan on repeating myself." He pulled backwards so he could see her expression. Her spine was pressed up against the tree and she was practically digging her nails into the bark of it. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted.*

*"Please don't..." Katniss' eyes remained closed. She stopped herself before asking him not to move away from her.*

*"Please don't what?" His voice was low and smooth.*

*The sound of it caused a ripple of electricity to shoot through her. She had to think fast. "Don't...touch me."*

*"I'm not touching you, Katniss." He wasn't. His body was a couple of inches away from hers, his face the same. His hands, a safe distance away from her head. "But don't you miss it, Katniss?"*

*'Yes!' Her heart exclaimed, but her brain said, "Miss what?" She looked at him. Katniss told herself to stay calm. Much easier thought than done.*

*He leaned in and spoke gently into her ear. "My touch...my hand holding yours?" He ran his hand down the tree and placed it a hair away from hers. "My fingers trailing down your skin?" He mimicked the motion precariously close to her cheek, but never laid a hand on her.*

*"Oh, God." She swallowed...hard. She could almost feel his fingers against her face as he teased her with them.*

*He could see a flicker of need in her eyes as they began to soften. "My kiss." His lips were dangerously close to hers. "Do you miss kissing me, Katniss? It felt like you missed it when I kissed you before."*

*She nodded her head, yes and said, "No?" It came out as a question. Her heart was racing. She was gripping the bark of the tree so hard a chunk of it fell to their feet.*

*"You can't lie to me. You miss me, Katniss." He moved his lips to her other ear. He listened as her breathing started to become shallow and labored. If it were up to him, he'd close the space between his lips and her cheek and place a kiss against it, but he needed her to allow it. He wouldn't force himself on her, though he was doing a passable job of seducing her into submission.*

*Katniss told herself not to think about what he proximately was doing to her insides. "What..." she cleared her throat. "What do you want, Peeta?"*

*"You," he tilted his head so she could feel the heat of his breath against her skin. "I want you."*

*She attempted to take a deep breath. She was so dizzy and confused. "You...you can't have...oh..." She felt his breath hot against her neck and her head automatically dropped back to grant him access, but she hit it against the tree.*

*Peeta knew how much she loved it when he kissed her in the crook of her neck so he trailed his breathing in that direction. "What can't I have?" His lips were back at her ear. He saw the tip of her tongue poke out between her lips and lick at them.*

*At this point, Katniss was tempted to tell him he could have anything he wanted. It took everything she had to answer, "Me. You can't have me."*

*"If I can't have you then how about an answer?"*

*"Answer?" She could barely speak.*



*He moved to the other ear by way of her cheek...chin...neck... "You never answered my question, Katniss." He never raised his voice above a melodic whisper. "Do you regret it?"*

*The muscles in her stomach were tightening. She could hear the blood pumping in her ears.*

*"Do you regret falling in love with me?" He pulled slightly away from her so he could see her reaction.*

*What was he doing to her? He should know better than to put them in this kind of position. "Peeta, this is dangerous. We shouldn't be..."*

*"Answer me. That's all I want...an answer." His voice was gentle and persuasive. He knew he wasn't being fair, but he was tired of playing nice. There was only one way to get Katniss back and simply talking to her wasn't the way to go. He couldn't just be her friend. He had to make her remember how she felt when they were together this way. He knew all of her secrets. Everything that drove her crazy and by the look on her face, she was on the brink of insanity.*

*She lifted a hand away from the tree and held it close to his face as if she was afraid touching him would scorch her. She was desperate to touch him. "Please...stop...doing this." She plastered her hand to the tree again. It was safer there.*

*"I'll stop as soon as you answer me." He tilted his head as if he were going to kiss her.*

*'Just do it.' She thought to herself. 'Kiss me already!'*

*He licked his lips before asking her again, "Do you regret falling in love with me?" He stood that way...waiting. Waiting... His lips at the ready to pounce on hers the moment she answered him.*

*She swallowed the huge lump that had formed in her throat. Katniss knew she shouldn't tell him. If she did it would give him the idea that she wanted them to get back together again. She opened her mouth to say, yes, but she couldn't lie to him. She couldn't let him believe that he wasn't loved by her so she took a deep breath and said, "I'll never regret loving yo..." Peeta's lips captured hers before she got the last word out.*

*He wasn't sure what to expect. She was either going to punch him or kiss him back. When he felt her fingers dig into his hair and her lips part, his heart sang.*

*Yes she missed his kiss. She missed the stirring she felt through her core at the mere touch of his lips. Her fingers threaded through his hair and the familiar soft curls she had loved to wrap around her fingertips. He was doing wonderful, sinful things to her mouth and Katniss didn't want it to end, but it had to...didn't it?*

*He hadn't expected her to succumb to him after all that they'd gone through the past few months. He was sure she'd fight him and roughly twenty seconds into their kiss that's exactly what she did. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away.*

*"Don't," she stood defiantly. "Stay..." She held her hand up in a stopping gesture. Peeta stepped back and licked his lips. She could see his eyes smoldering as he lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin. "Just..." She couldn't seem to form a complete sentence. Not while he was so close to her. Katniss started to slide out from his grasp. "Stay away." She was a foot away from the tree. "We can't do this," she warned him.*

*"You love me, Katniss." He told her with a tilt of his head. "You love me so much you're willing to put yourself through pain to protect me."*

*He stepped towards her. If he could only get her to admit her feelings, he knew their separation would be over.*

*The pain was totally necessary. "I am not...do not...No!" She held her hands up to him. "We can't do this! I won't let you!" She needed to keep him safe from the Capitol's reach. Her voice got softer as she stepped backwards. "I can't let you..." She had to get away from him before she gave in completely. She turned to make a run for it, but his hand stopped her.*

*"You can do whatever you want." He held onto her arm and ran his hand down it, threading his fingers through hers. "Don't you want to stop hurting? I know I do." He watched as she dropped her head. "If it were up to me, I'd go back in time...back to that train ride home and take back everything I said to you."*

*"We can't go backwards."*

*"No," he stepped closer to her and took her other hand in his. "But we can move forward and the direction we choose is up to us. Not a bunch of...strangers. Not Haymitch and most definitely not President Snow. It's up to us, Katniss and I know which direction I want to move towards."*

*She wanted this so badly. Katniss had longed for this moment...had cried herself to sleep at night wishing for something like this to happen. Letting Peeta back into her life in this capacity could harm him. 'No more than being his friend could,' she thought to herself. "What if they find out?" She lifted her worried eyes to his. "What if the..."*

*"What if? What if? Here's a what if for you...what if Snow is sitting in his mansion laughing at our sorrow? What if we're just putting on another show for him and his Capitol cronies?" Peeta tugged on her*

*hands to pull her closer. "What if we didn't flaunt it in their faces and we hid it? If we didn't tell a soul and took advantage of the woods?"*

*She could feel herself resigning to his logic and turning him away was killing her. "What if..."*

*Peeta ran a hand down her braid and said, "What if you just let me love you? I love you, Katniss." He closed the gap between them and placed a kiss against her cheek. "I love you," he whispered into her ear. His hands were roaming up and down her spine as he continued to whisper, "I love you," over and over again.*

*"I'm sorry, Peeta." She slipped out of his grasp. "Please forgive me." She ran from the woods leaving her game bag behind.*

"Please don't kill, Peeta," Katniss begged President Snow. "Please don't hurt him. I'll do whatever you want. I'll stop seeing him completely if that's what you want."

Snow gave her an evil grin and said, "On the contrary, Miss. Everdeen, I want you to prove your love for him." He arched a brow and said, "You'll go on the tour and prove to the nation that you love that boy and that your actions in the arena weren't done *against* the Capitol, but *for* him."

She couldn't believe her ears. Snow was ordering her to...love Peeta. "I will." Katniss wasn't sure if Snow was testing her or not, but she agreed to his command. "We'll convince the districts that nothing has changed between us. That we never intended to defy the Capitol."

"Aim higher."

"What do you mean?" Katniss was confused at his statement.

"Convince me. Convince me that you never intended on causing a disruption in our nation with your little stunt."

"I will...we will. We love each other. We do." Katniss made a desperate attempt at convincing him then and there. "We love each other very much."

"Prove it." Snow stood up to leave and turned to back to her. "That means no more kissing your...cousin either."

Katniss sat there and watched as he left, but the stench of him remained. An overbearing smell of blood and roses flooded her nose. Snow had seen it all. He'd seen Gale kiss her...Peeta coming right out and telling her that they should defy President Snow and continue their relationship behind his back. Snow had been watching them in the one place she thought was safe...in her sanctuary...in the woods.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter 4,**

### **a hunger games**

### **fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

## Chapter Three: Choices

**My girl, Effie is back! I love that woman. Thank you to S and A for helping me through these stories and committing to MJ. It takes a lot to be my beta and they're awesome! Much love for reading and reviewing. Ah...the Victory Tour. Time to go on a journey with our favorite pair. I wonder what trouble they'll get into...or stay out of? Wanna find out? Then read...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Prim walked out of school with a feeling of excitement flowing through her, she had been let out of school early to see her sister off on the Victory Tour and the thought of Katniss and Peeta being able to spend some time together, without having to sneak around, was thrilling. When she saw Peeta waiting for her at the entrance she asked, "Shouldn't you be home waiting for your prep team to show up?"

"Yes," he smiled at her. "But I didn't want you to walk home by yourself and it doesn't take much to make me handsome." He followed it up with a wink. "Besides, you didn't think I'd let my favorite girl walk in this weather by herself, did you?"

"You and Katniss never let me go anywhere by myself," she gave him a little smirk. "I'm not a baby you know?"

"I know, Prim." Peeta held her gloved hands in his. "This is the last time you and I are going to be able to talk before I go on tour...I just wanted to give you a proper goodbye."

"Why didn't you say so?" She quickly changed her mood. "I have no problem with a handsome victor walking me home from school. You must be pretty excited, huh? All those dinners you get to go to with

Katniss on your arm," Prim wrinkled her nose. "She won't be able to resist you."

Peeta let out a little laugh and said, "I'd rather stay home and have dinner with her there, but I will admit...I'm looking forward to some time with Katniss where she can't run off into the woods and hide."

"That only happened once and you shouldn't have tried to kiss her so soon. Women like to be wooed."

"Wooed?" Peeta laughed at Prim's choice of words. "I can't imagine Katniss wanting to be...wooed by anybody."

"You're wrong, Peeta." Prim had a look on her face like she was hiding something. "Katniss is just like every other girl out there. She can appreciate it when a guy..." Prim looked up at him, "...*you*, is willing to take his time with her."

Peeta hadn't regretted his decision to get Katniss to change her mind about the state of their relationship in the woods, but she had made him sorry for it, by not meeting him for lunch after their interlude by the tree. It took Peeta two weeks of constantly going to the woods and waiting for her to show up before she agreed to even talk to him again. Now they were back to having lunches together and every now and then Peeta would be able to sneak in a little kiss on her cheek or forehead...lips. Until last week when they were interrupted. "Has she said anything to you lately?"

"That would be breaking my sister's confidence...but yes." Prim giggled. "She told me about what happened when Gale showed up while you two were talking."

Peeta made a face and said, "She told you about that?" He really hoped Katniss didn't tell Prim everything about that morning.

"Yup. I think she needed someone to talk to."

"What did she say?" Peeta wondered how much information Katniss passed onto her sister.

"That you two were hugging..." Prim lifted the corner of her mouth in a grin and finished. "...though I'm sure it was something more than that, and Gale caught you guys."

Peeta chose to ignore Prim's little comment and asked. "She was pretty mad after that, wasn't she?"

"Not mad...more anxious than anything. At first I thought she was concerned about Gale beating you up or something, so I asked her if she thought he would, then she told me that she'd be more worried for Gale if you two had a fight." Peeta couldn't help but smile at Katniss thinking he could take Gale. "She said, whenever you're scared that someone is trying to hurt her, something comes over you and no one better get in the way of you protecting her." Prim looked up at him and said, "I think I have to agree with her on that. I've seen you fight...really fight in the arena. If you hadn't been stung by those tracker jackers I bet you would've killed Cato."

Having Prim talk about killing another kid as though it were just normal, every day conversation really bothered Peeta. "I didn't want to kill anybody, Prim."

"No, but that wasn't really up to you, was it?" Prim asked. "If it were up to you, Peeta, you'd have tried to save everyone in the arena. That's just who you are."

But Peeta wasn't thinking about saving everyone...he was thinking about saving Katniss...Prim...even Gale. He let out a sigh. "You think too highly of me, Prim."



"I do no such thing. I'm simply stating a fact. You are who you are and no one can change that."

"How can you know who I am when I don't even know myself?" He asked her.

"Sure you do, but I think everybody forgets themselves for a little while during their life. It's what makes us human." Prim slid her feet along the icy path as though she were skating. "You're a generous guy that puts my sister's needs ahead of everything. You put my needs first too. In fact..." she looked up at him and started walking instead of skating. "...I think you put everyone you meet ahead of yourself. Some people are just born to do the right thing, and you're one of those people." Hearing Prim say that to him, made him feel guilty over debating the choices Snow had given him.

"What if I don't know what the right thing is?" Talking to Prim always seemed to help Peeta for some reason. Some people would think it strange that he was such good friends with a twelve year old girl, but she was a lot wiser than most twelve year olds.

"Confused about something?" She asked as though she could see right through his dilemma.

"A little. I've got a decision to make and I'm not sure what choice is the right one."

"Want my advice?" She asked innocently.

Peeta grinned at her and said, "I wouldn't turn it down."

"Good," Prim exclaimed. "Follow your heart. If you know something is right, you'll feel it in your heart and as long as you follow that...you'll always make the right decision."

"What if my heart thinks both choices are right?" Currently that was the signal he was getting.

"One of them will outweigh the other and then you'll know." They walked quietly until they reached the entrance of Victor's Village which was bustling with cars and cameramen.

"Guess they're here," Peeta said with a sullen tone to his voice.

Prim tugged on his hand before they got too close to the others.  
"Peeta, give yourself some time."

"I don't really have a lot of time, Prim."

"You'll figure it out, Peeta. You always do." Prim reached up for a hug.  
"I'm going to miss you while you're gone. I like having you as an older brother. I know I complain when you take care of me, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Prim, I'm going to miss you too." He gave her a squeeze and watched her race through the snow for her front door. Peeta was taken aback when Prim referred to him as her older brother. He asked himself, what would an older brother do in this situation and the answer came to him. He'd take care of his family before anyone else. He saw Portia stepping out of a car across the village and Effie exiting Haymitch's house. 'You have to take care of your whole family,' he thought to himself. 'Not just Katniss and Prim, but all of them.'

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Effie Trinket had always loved her position with the Capitol until she met Peeta and Katniss. Their Games changed her whole life. Her kids

changed everything about her. Though she played the role of dutiful escort at all times, inside her heart was slowly being crushed to nothing.

Katniss and Peeta were still the talk of the Capitol. On occasion she'd hear people speak of the Quarter Quell, but they'd always follow it up with how lucky the tributes from Twelve will be with Katniss and Peeta as their mentors. Even the thought of them having to mentor neighboring children caused Effie great distress. Not only for the kids whose names she'd be calling out during the reaping, but for her children, Katniss and Peeta and their compassion for people in need. They would, no doubt, work just as hard to bring home a tribute from their district as they did to get themselves home, once again making themselves a prime target for the Capitol's revenge. Effie remembered how hard it was for their team to choose whose life to save in the arena, Katniss or Peeta's, prior to the rule change. She couldn't imagine them being able to make such a choice.

Effie had been going over many things since they left the Capitol, taking stock of her life, and she didn't like the direction it was going in. 'Time to make a change,' she thought to herself as she stared out the window of the car that was taking her to Victor's Village. She'd have to tell Haymitch of her decision, he deserved to know, but she wouldn't make a formal announcement until after the Victory Tour. Effie had decided to resign her position as the escort for District Twelve sighting the desire for a husband and children of her own. 'Now you're going to have to find yourself a man,' she sighed when the thought crossed her mind.

As they pulled into the area the Capitol built for the victors of the Hunger Games, Effie took notice of the stark contrast the rest of the district was to the place Katniss and Peeta now lived. The homes were nothing short of mansions, nine of which were barren. The

grounds were impeccably kept and one house stuck out like a sore thumb. Haymitch's. Though it wasn't in disrepair, the Capitol would never allow that, Effie could imagine a dark cloud looming over it much like the man himself.

"We're here, Miss. Trinket," her driver informed her.

"Thank you," Effie plastered on a smile. "If you don't mind, I'd like to stop by Mr. Abernathy's home first." The road was covered in snow and Effie was certain if she walked across the street, she'd fall flat on her face.

"As you like," the driver turned his head and pulled the vehicle in front of Haymitch's house.

Effie wondered if seeing Haymitch first was a wise choice so she added, "I must make sure he's presentable before the cameras arrive."

The driver smiled and commented, "Don't blame you. He's always three sheets to the wind." He got out of the car and held the door opened for her.

Effie felt a rush of cold smack her in the face and longed for their arrival in District Eleven where the sun would be shining. "Thank you," she took hold of the driver's hand as he escorted her to Haymitch's front door. "If you'll wait in the car. I'll be out shortly." Effie rang the bell and waited; when he didn't answer she knocked loudly thinking he was probably drunk out of his mind.

"Effie Trinket," Haymitch gave her a cocky grin as he held his door open. Sure enough, he was half dressed for the occasion.

"I knew you wouldn't be ready." She stepped into his house without an invitation. "Where are the rest of your clothes?" She held her fingers up to her nose to block the stench. "Seriously, Haymitch. You can afford a housekeeper. Why not get one?"

"I don't like strangers in my home," he answered as he walked towards his living room and put on a vest. "So, what brings you here, Effie? Shouldn't you be at Katniss or Peeta's house giving *them* a hard time?"

"I wanted to talk to you first." Effie walked around his living space and listened as the sound of her high heeled boots made a clicking noise.

"About what?" Haymitch tucked his shirt into his pants and sat down to pull on some socks. He lifted one up off of the floor and sniffed at it, deciding it was good enough.

"Oh for criminy's sake. Don't you have anything clean to wear?" Effie had almost forgotten how repulsed she became around Haymitch.

"These are clean enough." He pulled on the other sock which held the shape of his foot.

Effie shook her head out and said, "I've decided to make a change in my life that will affect you...all of you."

"Wait a second, Effie. I need to grab my shoes."

Effie knew the moment he said it that his home wasn't safe to speak in. Haymitch had been holding his shoes in his hand. "It may take you an hour to find them in this pig sty. Why don't I wait to have this conversation with you? I really must be checking on Katniss and Peeta."

"Sure. Sure," Haymitch walked up to her and squinted his eyes at her. "If you think it can wait."

"It's nothing major, Haymitch. I was simply thinking about settling down and if I did, I'm sure my husband wouldn't want me to spend my time with a drunkard such as yourself," though her words came out in a clipped, measured tone, her expression was troubled.

"Seeing anyone in particular?"

"My love life is none of your concern," she answered with a shake of her head.

He nodded at her as if understanding her unspoken message. "Well, good luck with snagging yourself a man." He put a hand on her shoulder and asked with his eyes if she was all right.

"As I said...my love life is none of your concern." She gave her head another shake answering Haymitch's unasked question. "You should find your shoes. The cameras will be here shortly." She turned and walked to his front door. She held onto the handle and felt his hand on her shoulder again. She lifted her face to his and gave him a halfhearted smile before opening the door and smiling as though the cameras were filming her...as though her life depended on it.

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Katniss sat in her room and silently hated what her prep team were doing to her. Her brows were being ripped out by their follicles, her

hair was filled with goop and being brushed out and her fingers were being adorned with fake nails.

Thoughts of President Snow's visit were plaguing her. She'd have to tell someone. The logical choice was Peeta, but if she told him, then she'd have to tell him everything and he'd hate himself for thinking he was the reason they were in trouble...again. 'Surely he'd blame himself for going into the woods and meeting me.' Katniss blamed herself for allowing Peeta to talk her into it. She should've stood her ground, but in the end it didn't really matter. Even if they hadn't met up in the woods, their separation would've been enough to cause Snow a problem and that was all on him. 'This entire thing is Snow's fault. He's the one that insists on having the Hunger Games,' Katniss thought.

After his visit her mother looked as though she were petrified for her life, but Katniss told her that the president visits all of the victors to wish them luck. It just wasn't made public knowledge. She was becoming quite adept at spewing fabrications. For the remainder of the day however, there would be no more lies. Today she was able to show Peeta...to tell him she loved him.

For months she had been trying to regain the person she was before letting Peeta into her life to no avail. He had pursued her with gusto once deciding the Capitol wouldn't harm them, but Katniss hadn't believed it. She was certain they would exact their revenge on them regardless of their popularity with the audience. After spending months telling Peeta there could be no romance between them, Katniss was now being encouraged by the Capitol...by President Snow himself, to play it up not only while they were on tour, but when they got back home as well. Loving Peeta publicly wouldn't be a problem, they both knew what they had to do, but privately...she was petrified he would think the only reason she had a change of heart was because Snow forced her hand. Katniss knew Snow's visit didn't

make a difference to her. She had already decided to let Peeta back into her life.

"You look beautiful." The sound of Prim's voice made her smile.

"Thank you," Katniss said to her. "But there's still a long way to go."

"A very long way," said Flavius, a member of her prep team.

Venia made Katniss' smile even bigger when she said, "There isn't too much work to be done. We're simply enhancing Katniss' natural beauty."

Prim sat on the edge of Katniss' bed and said, "Can I watch?"

"Shouldn't you be putting your dress on?" Katniss asked her.

"I guess, but this is much more interesting." Prim smiled at her and said, "Peeta's going to go mad over you."

"You think, Prim?" Katniss sincerely wanted to know.

"Peeta would love you if you walked out looking like Haymitch," she grinned.

"I don't know about that," Katniss rolled her eyes.

"Peeta loves *who* you are, Katniss, not what you look like," Prim walked over to her and said, "He'll always love you no matter what and you'll always love him. That's all you need to know."

Katniss lifted her eyes to her sister's and said, "Thanks Prim."

She nodded her head and said, "I think I am going to get dressed now. I have some new ribbons I want to put in my hair."



"Your sister is very sweet," Octavia smiled in the direction Prim disappeared.

"She's nothing like me," Katniss said under her breath causing her prep team to laugh.

Her prep team talked amongst themselves and Katniss chose to tune them out until they asked her about the Quarter Quell. "You must be so excited? Don't you feel lucky?"

"Of course she does," Venia said, before giving Katniss a chance to answer. "It's her first year as a victor and she gets to be a mentor in the Quarter Quell."

No, she didn't feel lucky. She felt repulsed, but she answered, "Oh, yes." 'One more thing for you to worry about,' she thought. 'More kids fighting to the death.'

Katniss sat quietly as her prep team finished their work.

"You'd look stunning with my purple lipstick," Flavius held it in his hand as though debating whether or not to put it on her. In the end he applied a fresh coat of it to his own lips. "Too bad Cinna insists on pink."

"Cinna knows what he's doing," Venia defended the stylist. "He did set her on fire."

"People are still talking about that," Octavia said in a bubbly tone. "I don't think anyone will ever forget the two of you coming out in that parade." Katniss was reminded of President Snow's comment about Cinna being 'prophetic' in his costume choice and worried for her him.

"Hello?" Her mother entered her room and addressed them in a shy tone of voice. "Cinna asked that I come in and show you how I braided her hair on reaping day."

Katniss found her prep team's enthusiasm towards her mother's adept fingers almost endearing. They asked her mother questions and watched each step as it was broken down for them.

"You're very gifted," Venia said to Katniss' mother.

"Katniss! Why didn't you tell us your mother was so talented?" Octavia asked with sincerity.

"Oh, you're being too kind," Katniss watched her mother's reflection in the mirror at her prep team's praise, and felt a surge of gratitude towards the trio. Her mother had a look of pride, something Katniss hadn't seen in a long time. When her hair was done to perfection her mother asked, "Would you three mind if I have a moment alone with my daughter?"

Katniss watched as Flavius, Octavia and Venia gathered their paraphernalia and exited her room. She grew concerned that her mother wasn't satisfied with the explanation she gave her as to why the president of their nation was in their study, sipping tea earlier. "Is everything okay, mom?"

Her mother sat at the edge of her bed and patted the spot next to her. Katniss sat down and waited for the questions to begin. "I'm not sure. Is everything okay, Katniss?"

Panic washed through Katniss, but she wasn't about to offer any information until her mother specified why they were having their private talk. "Everything is fine."

"Katniss, you're not happy." Her mother took her hand. "You haven't been happy since you got home from the Games and..." her mom stared at their joined hands. "...I want you to know that if I'm the reason for it...for you and Peeta not being together...I'm sorry."

Katniss had expected questions on the spur of the moment visit they had earlier, maybe something about staying out of trouble while on the tour...minding her manners, but this came as a complete shock. "Why would you think that?"

"There's talk around town that you and Peeta haven't been seeing one another because I thought you were too young to date. I know you've been sneaking off to meet up with him in the woods, Prim told me, and if you felt as though you had to keep that from me..."

"No, mom." Katniss turned to face her mother. "Peeta and I were just going through some...stuff. It had nothing to do with you."

"Regardless..." She patted Katniss' hand. "Peeta is more than a mother could dream of for her daughter, and you two obviously love each other very much."

"Is it obvious, mom?" Katniss wondered. "Even now?"

She smiled at Katniss and said, "Blatantly. The two of you were a mess until you started sneaking off together." Her mother let out a little puff of air and said, "You and Peeta have my blessing, Katniss. I won't be responsible for standing in the way of the one person that made you truly happy."

Since coming home, Katniss had tried to repair her relationship with her mother. She put her in charge of the money she won and returned her hugs when given. Katniss came to realize that the depression her mother had gone through after the loss of her father wasn't her

mother's fault. She could no more help her state after her father's passing than Katniss could help the torment she had gone through after her and Peeta's break up. For the first time since she was eleven years old, Katniss was the one to initiate a hug. She wrapped her arms around her mother and said, "Thank you, mom. That means a lot to me and I know Peeta will appreciate it."

"Now maybe the two of you can quit hiding...hmmm?" Her mother asked with hope in her eyes.

"Mom, we weren't hiding that kind of relationship. We've just been...friends...having lunches...things like that." Katniss pulled back and gave her mother a sad smile.

"But you wanted it to be something more, didn't you?" Katniss nodded. "Does Peeta know you wanted something more?"

"No."

"Perhaps it's time you let him in on that little secret."

After everything that happened that day, her mother's words of encouragement was just what she needed. "I will, mom." Katniss felt a sense of relief wash through her. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

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"Peeta, these are remarkable," Portia told him as she walked through his makeshift art studio studying his paintings. "Truly, spectacular."

"Truly horrific," Peeta said in a glum tone. "I can't get the images out of my head."

Portia turned to him and put her arm through his. "Time, Peeta. You need time to let the memories fade." Portia had no clue that she was the second person that day to tell Peeta time would be the solution to his problems.

"No, Portia. Time won't be enough to rid my mind of these images. I don't think they'll ever go away." Peeta stood back as several Capitol attendants loaded up his portraits to display on the Victory Tour and took them away. "Truthfully, as much as I want to forget...I also don't want to forget. I owe it to those tributes to remember what happened in the arena."

She rubbed his upper arm and walked him down the stairs. "You can't beat yourself up about killing the other tributes, Peeta. It's not healthy," Portia said quietly.

"I'm not. I know I did what I needed to do to keep me and Katniss alive, but..." Peeta shrugged. "I still have to face those families. How am I supposed to do that? How do I stand up and say, I'm sorry for your loss, when I'm the reason their kids are dead?"

"Enough," Effie said in a hushed tone from behind Peeta. "That's enough of that kind of talk." She closed the gap between herself and the pair. "We all know you're not the one to blame, Peeta. You're the only one that doesn't know that. Now you stop wallowing in self pity and start acting like a victor." The cameramen were outside of his house getting ready to film him and Katniss as they greeted each other before heading off on the tour. "People are watching," Effie continued to whisper. "You must not show them this side of you, Peeta. None of us can." Effie had grief written all over her face. "We have a show to put on. Now let's give the audience what they want."

Peeta smiled at his escort, grateful for her bluntness and said, "Let's get this show on the road, Effie."

Effie smiled in response and said, "You wait in the doorway for Katniss and I'll go get her." Once outside she started clapping her hands together to get everyone's attention. "Are the camera's ready? Where is Haymitch?" She began barking out orders as she left Peeta's abode.

"We're very lucky to have that woman on our team," Portia said quietly to Peeta. "Now get in place before she has both of our heads on a platter."

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"Places! Places!" Effie called out from Katniss' living room. "We're about to do the first outdoor shot, where the victors greet each other at the beginning of their *marvelous* trip. All right, Katniss, big smile, you're very excited, right?"

Katniss' face lit up with a smile, as her escort instructed. "Right."

"All right. Here we go," Effie put her hands on Katniss' shoulders and pushed her out the door.

Peeta stepped out of his front door wondering how Katniss would act towards him. He knew she would be playing the Star Crossed Lovers angle, but would she just be portraying the role or would she actually allow herself to feel the way they had felt before. He lifted his eyes and saw her standing in her doorway. She was stunning, as usual. It didn't matter if she was draped in fur, as she was now, set on fire, or wearing her father's hunting jacket. He always felt butterflies in his stomach when he looked at her.

She walked across the snow covered street towards his house, and then ran, not caring in the least if she looked like a lovesick fool. His smile was waiting to greet her, but there were questions in his eyes. No one would notice it, but Katniss did and she was determined to erase any suspicions he may have had.

Peeta held his arms open and Katniss threw herself into them plastering her lips against his. Just the feel of her in his arms was enough to get his pulse racing. He lifted her up in the air and spun her in a circle, but his leg gave out on the snow and they fell into a bank of the white stuff. They laughed at their predicament before Peeta took notice of something. Katniss' eyes. They were looking at him as though she couldn't get enough of him. As though no one else existed but him. Katniss was looking at him with love in her eyes. "Katniss?" He whispered to her.

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in doing a little lip reading?" She asked him with a soft smile.

If he was unsure of his decision to take President Snow up on his offer before, now he was certain he was doing the right thing. He took her muff covered ears in his hands and kissed her with his eyes wide open. When it was through he let her pull him to his feet and thread her arm through his. He lifted one of her ear muffs and whispered into her ear, "You know I'm holding you to that, right?" She grinned and nodded as they stepped into their waiting automobile.

She knew Peeta wouldn't question her sudden change of heart, she still wasn't planning on telling him about her visit from President Snow. She'd have to talk to Haymitch about it, but finding the right time and a safe place to do so, would be difficult on the Capitol's train.

Peeta wanted to inform Haymitch of his decision, the rebellion would have to go on without him, however, there was no privacy on the

moving train. Going outdoors while the train was in motion was no longer an option due to the weather, so he sat patiently in his room, waiting for everyone to go to bed. He wondered if Katniss expected him to go to her room, but he couldn't...not until he talked to Haymitch. Once he was behind closed doors with her; he knew he'd never leave. Her decision to take him back still came as a shock to him. It had only been a week ago, but Katniss made it clear that she would consider resuming their relationship. She just needed time to decide. Watching her walk off into the woods with Gale after their morning rendezvous had been as painful as seeing her mouth the word, 'hi' to him when returning home from the arena...more painful than finding out about the kiss they had shared. It devastated him.

*The sky was still dark and the woods had an eerie hold on him. After the nightmare Peeta had, he knew sleep would be elusive. He had tried to paint, but the image in his head was too distorted. He walked into his kitchen and took out a mixing bowl intending on making some bread, but after fifteen minutes of standing in the chilly room and staring at the countertops, Peeta resigned his decision to bake and got dressed. He could've gone to the bakery to see his family, they'd be awake, but then his father would ask him questions as to why he was there and looked so forlorn. He chose to walk through the snow, not knowing where his feet would take him. He wound up next to one of the openings in the fence that led to the woods. He peered around, making sure no one was watching him, and entered the forbidden forest, walking to the area in which Katniss and he had met several times. He stood there against a rock, listening to the sound of the night creatures and felt a chill go up his spine. Times like these Peeta wondered how Katniss could continue to love the woods. It reminded him too much of the arena. Just as he was about to leave he heard her voice.*



*"Peeta?" Katniss had been several yards away from him. "What are you doing here?" She looked around to make sure no one was there. Not that anyone would be so early in the morning, and not many residents from their district dared to enter the woods.*

*He stared at her as she stopped walking towards him and felt himself needing her arms...the comfort only she could provide. He walked straight into them and was thankful she returned his embrace. "I couldn't sleep," his voice was shaky. From the cold or the nightmare, he didn't know.*

*"So you came to the woods?"*

*"I came to you," he sniffed in her ear. Nightmares had been a regular thing since coming back from the Games. They usually consisted of Peeta not being able to get to Katniss. Sometimes, like tonight, he'd see her face in place of a dead tribute. He'd had the dream before; however, tonight's version of it shook him to the core.*

*"Peeta, you're shivering. Are you cold?" Katniss asked him as she ran her hands up and down his arms.*

*"No," he shook his head against her shoulder. She tried to pull away from him, but he tightened his grip. "Don't go yet. I need to hold you...need to..." the tears started to silently fall from his eyes. "I need you, Katniss," he cried into her ear.*

*"Oh, Peeta. Peeta," she exclaimed as she pulled him closer to her. "It's okay. Everything will be all right." He could feel her hands stroking his arms...back...cheek. "Tell me what happened. What's wrong?"*

*"You were...dead. I killed you," he confessed.*

*"I'm not dead. I'm right here." She kissed his ear and said tenderly, "I'm right here."*

*Peeta gripped her...pulled her against him so hard he was afraid she'd break in two. "It was horrible, Katniss. Horrible."*

*"What was? Tell me," she urged him.*

*"My nightmare."*

*"Ah," she said as if she completely understood. "Want to talk about it? You might feel better."*

*Peeta nodded as he lifted his tear streaked face to hers. "We were in the arena," which was the setting for all of his nightmares. "I was with the Careers and we came upon the girl from Eight. They were taunting her...grabbing her. Then Cato threw her to me so I could do the same, but it wasn't her...it was you and..." he swallowed hard. "...I didn't save you. I tossed you around like garbage. Like I did to her. I watched them cut you up and I didn't do a thing about it. They cut you to pieces and I just walked away with them. Leaving you there to bleed to death."*

*"You saved me from them, Peeta."*

*He continued talking ignoring her comment. "The next thing I knew I was walking back towards the campsite and you were crawling backwards...scooting across the dirt, trying to get away from me." He looked into her eyes and said, "I knew, Katniss. I knew I should've done something to protect you, but I didn't and you were dying...bleeding everywhere."*

*"Shhh," she stroked his head. "It's okay."*

*"I picked you up and carried you next to the fire. I wanted to warm you up and you just kept staring at me. Looking at me like you were so disappointed...like I had betrayed you." He sniffed and felt Katniss wipe away some tears from his cheeks. "I told you to close your eyes. That I'd make it quick, but you didn't. You just kept looking at me like you were daring me to kill you. Then I did it. I..." his voiced cracked. "I sliced your throat and watched as you bled to death."*

*"You didn't do that, Peeta. That never happened."*

*"It didn't happen to you, but it happened to her." Peeta stormed away from Katniss.*

*"Is that how she died? Did you carry her and put her by the fire?" She walked up behind him and placed a hand on his back.*

*"No," Peeta shook his head.*

*"Tell me how she died."*

*His whole body was like ice as he described to Katniss the events of District Eight's death. She did in fact try to crawl away from Peeta, but he told her he was there to help her. He put her head in his lap and stroked her hair. He talked to her, trying to make her more comfortable before he slit her throat and the whole time he kept telling her he was sorry. "I wanted nothing more than to run away from the Careers, Katniss and then..." he sniffed. "...I found your snare. It was as though you were sending me a message to stay strong." Peeta turned to her and held onto her hands. "Like you were saying, you can do this, Peeta."*

*"You did do it. You saved me." She gave his hands a little shake and said, "I'm alive because of you."*

*"Your life is in danger because of me."*

*"I was the one that pulled out the berries," she said to him.*

*"I was the one that suggested you hold them up in the air for everyone to see," he tried to take the blame.*

*"Yes, but I did it. I held them up, I could've chosen not to."*

*Peeta rested his forehead against hers. "Do you think we'll ever get past this, Katniss? That we'll ever have a future together?"*

*"I don't know," she whispered.*

*They stood that way for a few minutes before Peeta asked her, "Can you ever forgive me, Katniss?"*

*"There's nothing to forgive you for," her eyes were aglow with the reflection of the setting moon.*

*"I left you. I walked away from you after I told you I'd never leave you."*

*"We left each other, Peeta." She ran her hand down the side of his face. "I know you were only doing what you thought was best for me. That's why we can't..."*

*"Don't say it," he cut her words short. "Please. I don't know how many more times I can hear you tell me you don't want me in your life."*

*"Peeta, I don't want anyone in my life. It hurts too much."*

*"Then why, Katniss? Why did you..." He turned from away from her.*

*"Why did I what?"*

*"I saw what you did when we were waving at everyone...the day we got back from the Games...I saw you mouth the word, hi to Gale. Like you had been waiting to see him. Like he was the one you wanted..."*

*"Whoa," she walked around him to face him head on. "What are you talking about? I never did that."*

*"Yes you did!" Peeta had tried to put his jealousy towards Gale aside . When she told him that Gale had kissed her he thought his insides were going to explode with fury, but he played it off as though he didn't care.*

*"I did no such thing!" She shouted back at him. "And so what if I did?"*

*"That was our thing. Not yours and his! It was ours!" Peeta wanted to smack himself for sounding like such a complainer.*

*"Peeta, I never mouthed any...anything to Gale. Not one thing and I never would."*

*"I saw your lips moving. I saw you looking at him. I know what I saw, Katniss." Peeta's heart was breaking all over again at the thought of Katniss sharing something that had been an intimate part of their relationship. Their own secret language.*

*"Prim." She took hold of his upper arm. "I was looking at Prim. She was the only person I saw in that crowd."*

*"Prim?" Peeta's eyes flew to hers. "You mean...you weren't talking to Gale?"*

*"No," she shook her head. "Prim was bouncing up and down on his shoulders...waving at me. So when she said, hi. I mouthed it back to her."*

*Peeta pulled her into his arms and held her close. "I thought..." He was flushed with relief. "It doesn't matter what I thought. Not anymore." He kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear. "I'm an idiot."*

*He could feel her smile against his face as she said, "You are an idiot." Her fingers were pulling at the back of his jacket. "You're the only man that will ever get to read these lips."*

*His heart was racing when he heard her words. "Katniss, I love you. I know you don't want to hear it, but I do. I love you." He trailed soft pecks down the side of her neck. His insides flopped around when she dropped her head back and let out a little sigh. For that moment in time, she was his to love again. He ducked his head down to place a lingering kiss against her throat, and then trailed his lips up to hers. He brushed them back and forth against her slightly parted ones. He placed a soft peck on her bottom lip then her top one just waiting for her to give him a signal...anything that said it was okay for him to show her just how much he loved her. She threaded her fingers through his hair and that was all the sign he needed. He turned his head to the side and felt her licking her lips.*

*"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Gale yelled out from a few feet away. "Do you two want to get us all killed?"*

The sound of Haymitch choking brought Peeta out of his thoughts. He opened up the door to his quarters and saw his mentor stomping his feet on the carpeting next to the train's exit. "How'd you get snow on your feet? Did you go outside?" Peeta hadn't noticed that the train had stopped for refueling.

A startled Haymitch turned to face Peeta. "I needed some air."

"We've stopped?" Peeta saw this as his opportunity to talk to Haymitch about his decision.

"Yeah."

"Good. I need to talk to you." Haymitch had a worrisome look about him.

"I'm popular tonight," he mumbled. "Let's go." Haymitch turned around and exited through the door he just entered through.

Peeta hoped his mentor would understand the choice he had made. He had an opportunity to keep everyone he loved safe from the Capitol and he had to go for it.

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"Not going to see Katniss off at the train station today?" Thom asked as he was getting ready to leave the mines for the day. "Would've thought you would be on the list...seeing as you're related and all."

"Nah," Gale had no desire to see Katniss and Peeta fall back into their old habits. "Too much work to do." He looked at the canary flitting about in its cage. 'I know how you feel,' he thought as he looked at the trapped bird. He waved goodbye to Thom and went back to work trying to put thoughts of Katniss and Peeta sitting on a fancy train, getting ready to go on the Victory Tour and eating gourmet foods, while he was caged in the mines, out of his head.

After Katniss had explained to him about the Capitol and their desire to seek revenge on her and Peeta, Gale had tried to keep an open mind about the pair. It was difficult though. He was constantly being

questioned about the status of Katniss and Peeta's involvement with one another and Gale was sick of blaming her mother for their indifference towards one another. Blaming the Capitol was so much more tempting. Seeing Katniss each week, knowing she showed up at his house while he was working in the mines and bringing his family food had been a sore spot for Gale. He didn't say anything about it until he noticed the loaves of bread they were getting on a regular basis. That could mean only one of two things, Katniss was bringing them bread from Peeta or Peeta was bringing it himself. When Gale confronted his mother about it, she told him that she was working for Peeta and that the baked goods they were receiving almost daily were his form of payment. His brothers and sister were thrilled with the arrangement as they'd never had so many treats in their life. Cookies, biscuits, muffins...Peeta kept them in full supply. Where Gale had once been jealous of his relationship with Katniss, he was now jealous of the fact that Peeta was taking care of his family too. Gale felt somehow less of a man whenever he ate something that came from Peeta. He still felt anger towards the baker's son, but now he had a multitude of reasons. Peeta's unwavering love for Katniss, hers for him, the berry incident, supplying his family with things Gale could never afford and his lack of concern for the residents of their district...for Catnip. That could be the only explanation, as far as Gale was concerned, for Peeta's actions in the woods last week.

*"You mean...you weren't talking to Gale?" He heard a familiar male voice coming from the spot where he and Katniss usually met and wondered who was talking about him until he realized it was Peeta. Gale wondered to himself, 'Why the hell is Peeta here?'*

*"No. Prim was bouncing up and down on his shoulders...waving at me." Gale stopped walking when he realized that Katniss and Peeta were having a conversation...about him. "So when she said, hi. I mouthed it back to her." He stood behind a tree and spied on them.*



*"I thought...It doesn't matter what I thought. Not anymore." Peeta said to her. Gale wanted to run through the woods and pull Katniss out of Peeta's arms. He kissed her cheek and whispered something in her ear.*

*Katniss smiled at him and said something back, but Gale couldn't make it out. He walked around the back of the tree to get a better vantage point and saw Katniss clinging to Peeta...her face when she said, "You're the only man that will ever get to read these lips." The way she said it made it sound like she was inviting Peeta to kiss her. He had never heard Katniss sound this way before. He barely recognized her voice.*

*"Katniss, I love you. I know you don't want to hear it, but I do. I love you." Gale could feel his blood boiling as he watched Peeta trail his lips along Katniss' neck. 'Push him away, Catnip,' his thoughts were practically screaming at him. 'Tell him to knock it off.' But Katniss threw her head back and made a sound of pleasure. Gale couldn't believe his eyes. Peeta's hormones were going to get them all killed if the Capitol found out about this. Peeta was... 'God, what is he doing to her and why is she letting him?' His thoughts were screaming to him. He just held his lips next to hers, moving them back and forth over her opened ones and stared at her then he placed his lips against her bottom lip...her top lip and kissed her. They were just little pecks, but out of all the moments Gale had witnessed while they were in the arena, this was by far the most intimate of them all. Katniss ran her hands through Peeta's hair. 'Just like she did when you kissed her,' he thought. But unlike Gale, who Katniss pushed away, she was pulling Peeta closer to her. Gale knew he needed to stop them before they went any further.*

*"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Gale yelled at them as he stepped out of the shadows. "Do you two want to get us all killed?"*

*Katniss and Peeta jumped apart. Peeta placed his arm in front of her, as though he was protecting her from unseen danger. "Gale," Peeta said as calmly as he could.*

*"Gale!" Katniss exclaimed at the same time.*

*"I expected something like this from you," Gale pointed his finger at Peeta. "But you, Catnip? I thought you knew better."*

*"Leave Katniss alone," Peeta stood between the two of them. "She hasn't done anything wrong. Neither one of us has, so why don't you..."*

*"Nothing wrong?" Gale threw his arms up in the air. "How about not doing what the Capitol wants? Not staying the hell away from you!" He stood nose to nose with Peeta.*

*"Gale, stop it!" Katniss yelled at him.*

*"Butt out, Catnip! This is between me and dough boy here," Gale didn't even want to look at her. Months of rage against Peeta had been boiling up and it was all coming to a head.*

*"Let's not do anything we'll regret." Peeta sounded too calm for the situation which pissed Gale off all the more. "You and I aren't enemies, Gale."*

*"And what are we? We sure as hell aren't friends," Gale growled at him.*

*"You're Katniss' friend and I respect that, but you have no business poking your nose into our business," Peeta said.*

*"The hell I don't!" Gale accosted Katniss. "Are you seriously going to tell me that you're okay with this? You're okay with him threatening all of our lives just so you two can have a little...romp in the woods?"*

*Katniss' fury came out and Peeta took hold of her so she wouldn't attack Gale. "Romp in the woods? Who the hell do you think you are saying that to me?"*

*"You have no right, Gale!" Peeta yelled as he held onto Katniss by the upper arms.*

*"I have every right. It's my life in danger...my family's lives. They're not going to kill the two of you. You're the Star Crossed Lovers...star crossed my ass! Lovers maybe, but definitely not star crossed!" Gale spun Peeta around by the shoulder. "I don't care what you do with your life, but when you put my family in danger, that's where I draw the line." His words were spoken in a low, threatening voice.*

*"I have no intention of putting anyone in danger." Peeta's temper was rising. "If you want to have it out with me, that's fine. I'm more than happy to do that with you, but let's not pretend it's your family you're worried about." Peeta stood directly in front of Katniss. "You've been itching to get your hands on Katniss since...how long has it been, Gale? Months? Years? You're just pissed because she wants nothing to do with you."*

*"Is that why she spends every Sunday with me and not you?"*

*"Who said she's spending them only with you?" Peeta stepped forward until he and Gale were face to face. Katniss had taken a step back. "You think you're the only one she has time for?"*

*"You son of a bitch! You've been coming out here this whole time and risking all of our lives?" Gale pushed Peeta by the shoulders causing him to stumble backwards.*

*"Stop it!" Katniss screamed at them. "Stop it right now!" But they both ignored her.*

*"What pisses you off more, Gale? The fact that she doesn't love you or that she loves me...someone from town?" Peeta righted himself and glared at Gale.*

*"I don't give a shit where you're from..."*

*"Bull!" Peeta countered.*

*Gale slowly walked towards Peeta who stood his ground and said between clenched teeth. "You're exactly what I thought you'd be. A self centered, stuck up piece of..."*

*"I mean it! Stop this right now!" Katniss attempted to intervene by stepping between them.*

*"No, Katniss. Let him say what's on his mind," Peeta told her. "Let him tell me how much he hates me."*

*"Oh, I don't hate you. I couldn't care less about you." Gale said with venom in his voice. "The Capitol can kill you for all I care, but her..." he pointed towards Katniss. "...she's off limits!"*

*"Yeah," Peeta's eyes filled with fury. "Off limits to you!" Gale was about to lift his fist to Peeta, but the look in his eyes caught Gale off guard. "I wouldn't suggest it, Gale." Peeta said as if knowing his intentions. "I don't want to do this with you, but I won't go down without a fight and you've seen me in the arena...I don't go down very easily."*

*Gale turned to Katniss, who was a much easier target and said, "What happened to you? You used to care about the people of this district. You used to put your family ahead of everything and now..." Gale pointed towards Peeta. "...you put him first? They can kill Prim, Catnip," Gale's tone was softer now, not as angry, but concerned. "Is that what you want? Do you want them to kill Prim?"*

*Katniss was shaking her head. "No."*

*"They're not going to kill Prim," Peeta tried to get in front of Gale, but he kept walking towards Katniss who was moving away from both of them. "They don't even know about this...unless you're planning on telling people. Is that what you're going to do? Finally got something to hold over us? To use against us, Gale?"*

*"Shut up, Peeta! I'm not talking to you," Gale turned and yelled at him.*

*"Why not?" Peeta finally forced his way between Gale and Katniss.*

*"Why aren't you talking to me anymore? A second ago I was the one you wanted to hit, now that you know I won't be bullied you decided to guilt Katniss into your way of thinking?"*

*"If she's got guilt, it's because of you. You're the one putting her in this position."*

*"You just can't stand it, can you? She doesn't love you." Peeta's words cut through Gale like a knife. "She doesn't love you, Gale."*

*"She only loves you because you saved her life!" Gale started throwing out false accusations to Peeta.*

*"That's it!" Katniss pushed them apart from one another. "Knock it off right now!" She looked between the pair of them and said, "Who do you think you are...both of you fighting over me like I'm a piece of*

*meat?" She faced Gale and said, "You have no right to tell me how to live my life and who I can or cannot love. President Snow is doing a fine job of that and he doesn't need anyone's help, let alone my supposed best friend." She turned to Peeta and said, "And you...you don't get to tell anyone who I love either. You no longer have that right. I haven't given it back to you and I'm not sure if I will. Gale's right."*

*"But Katniss..." Peeta started to say.*

*She interrupted him. "No, Peeta. I know we've got the tour coming up and what we're supposed to be doing on it, but what happens when we get back? Are we supposed to hide for the rest of our lives?"*

*"I'll figure something out, Katniss. I swear I will," Peeta pleaded with her.*

*"This is no longer up for debate. When and if I choose to come back to you, it will be because I want to, not because you've somehow managed to wear me down, and you do that Peeta...you know you do." Gale stood back enjoying Katniss chewing Peeta out. "And I'm weak when it comes to you, Peeta. You know exactly what buttons to push, how to play me...which I don't appreciate...so stop. Just stop. I'm not an idiot. I know what you've been doing and I've let you, but I can't let you anymore. So..." she took a deep breath. "...give me this week...just until we start the Victory Tour. Let me have that time to clear my head and make a decision and I promise, I won't let anyone," she flashed an icy look at Gale. "...tell me what to do."*

*"Not even Snow?" Gale asked under his breath.*

*They both responded in unison. "Shut up, Gale!"*

*"Can you do that for me, Peeta?" Katniss placed a hand on his chest. "Can you give me some time to think this through?" Peeta just stared*

at her. "Peeta, I know how much you mean to me," her voice was tender and soft. Gale hated it when she spoke that way to the dough boy. "I can't disregard that. And you could be right...the Capitol might not do a damn thing to us, but this is still my choice. Okay?"

"Okay, Katniss." Peeta looked like a puppy that had been kicked. "Will you..." he looked up at Gale and lowered his voice down, but Gale still heard him. "Will you promise not to come back to me and say you never wanted a boyfriend or some crap like that? Please don't use that as an excuse."

"I won't. And Peeta...you were wrong when you said I didn't want to hear you say you loved me," she brushed her hand across his cheek. "I did want to hear it."

"Can I...can I kiss you goodbye, Katniss?" Gale wanted to puke at Peeta's request. 'As if Catnip is going to say yes after the way you acted towards me,' he thought.

"I'd like that very much," she sighed.

Gale turned his head when he saw them saying their farewells to one another. He wasn't sure if he should stay or go. Since he didn't want them getting carried away again he stood there waiting for her.

"I love you, Katniss." He heard Peeta say.

"I know you do," she sounded like she was on the brink of tears. "I know, Peeta. I've always known." Katniss started to walk towards Gale then turned around and said, "I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Okay," Peeta walked by Gale and said, "See ya around, Gale," like they hadn't been on the verge of coming to blows only minutes before.

Gale didn't say a thing. He and Katniss just started heading off into the woods. He had decided to talk to her while they were hunting, to remind her why she should stay away from Peeta, but before he could get a word out she said, "I thought you were my friend. This whole time I thought, Gale's my friend and when it comes right down to it, he'll put his personal feelings aside and support me no matter what. Boy was I wrong." She faced him and said, "Peeta and I have been together since we were trapped inside of the elevator shaft in the mines last year. This isn't something I feel because he saved my life, though he has on numerous occasions, I feel this way because..." Katniss let out a burst of air and said, "I am in love with him, Gale." she took several deep breaths and Gale watched as tears filled her eyes. "For the life of me, I can't stop loving him. Believe me, I've tried."

He had known her for years. She was his best friend, but Katniss was right, he wasn't acting like one. "I'm sorry," Gale was ashamed of himself. "I'm sorry, Catnip. I can still be your friend."

"Can you?" She blinked back her tears.

"I can try." Gale listened to her tell him about their entire relationship. How he got her to open up and show a side of her that no one else, including Gale, ever saw. Listening to her talk about Peeta wasn't as hard as he thought it would be. It hurt at first, but in the end, his main concern was Katniss. "Want my opinion?"

"That depends," she asked with a straight face. "Who's giving it? That jerk that started a fight with Peeta or the guy I've known since I was a kid?"

Gale grinned at her and said, "A little of both."

Katniss rolled her eyes at him and said, "Go ahead."



*Gale studied the ground and said, "I think it's pretty obvious I'm not the biggest fan of Peeta's, but you're different when you're with him. Good different." He looked at her and said, "Know when I started to have...more than friendly feelings towards you?"*

*"No," she shook her head.*

*"Roughly around the time you got trapped in an elevator shaft." Gale quickly continued before she could say anything. "You started to change around that time. You smiled more...you seemed happier and I liked it." Gale focused on a bush to the side of them and said, "Little did I know the reason for the change was Peeta Mellark."*

*Katniss let out a breath and said, "So now what?"*

*"Now, I stop pining over another man's girl and you make a decision as to whether or not you're going to let the Capitol continue to run your life."*

Gale stood at the entrance of the mine's elevator shaft and got inside of the stuffy box with a group of men and women. He looked around it and wondered if Katniss had made her choice and if it was the right one.

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Haymitch stood on the train tracks for the second time that night. The first time he was listening to Katniss tell him about Snow's orders for how she should behave on the Victory Tour. Haymitch had wanted her to tell Peeta, but she refused, claiming that he didn't need to think President Snow was the reason for her change of heart.

Haymitch wanted to bring them both outside so they could each tell the other about Snow's visit, but he wasn't going to say a thing until he knew what Peeta had decided.

"Why am I standing in the snow for the second time tonight?" Haymitch asked Peeta.

"You need to know what I've decided."

"You're taking Snow up on his offer, aren't you kid?" Haymitch could tell by the look on Peeta's face that he wasn't proud of his choice.

"I have to."

"What you have to do is work with the rebellion. That's the only way you can keep Katniss safe," Haymitch had to try and convince Peeta to do the right thing. "You think this deal with President Snow won't come back and bite you in the ass? You think he'll even honor it?"

"I have to take my chances, Haymitch." Peeta started to walk away.

It was low and Haymitch hated himself for what he was about to say. "Snow went to see her too." Peeta froze in place. "He fed her a load of bull." Haymitch told Peeta about Katniss and President Snow's conversation.

Peeta saw right through Snow's visit to Katniss. "He wants to make sure I do what he wants on the Victory Tour."

"Why else would he say that crap to Katniss?" Haymitch put his hand on Peeta's shoulder. "Snow wanted to make sure you didn't say anything when making your speeches to the districts and he's giving you a little incentive."

"He's giving me Katniss," Peeta said on a sigh.

"That's right, kid. We both know there's no threat of an uprising in Twelve. Now why would he say that to her? To make sure she played nice with you on the tour." Haymitch was sure this information would cause Peeta to change his mind about the rebellion.

"Then I guess I better not let him down," Peeta told Haymitch. "Sorry, but I need to protect my family and that includes you, old man."

Peeta was almost at the end of the train when he heard Haymitch call out to him, "You think she's welcoming you back because she's in love with you?"

Peeta turned to him, "I know that's why."

"Is it?"

"I don't like what you're getting at, Haymitch."

"I'm not coming right out and saying she's had a change of heart because Snow told her to, but it makes you wonder...would she have changed her mind so easily if Snow hadn't told her to?" Haymitch felt no better than Snow leading Peeta to doubt Katniss' reasons for her decision.

Peeta glared at Haymitch, "What makes you people any better than Snow? You might have the nation's best interests in mind, but you're willing to use me and Katniss...toy with our emotions...in order to get your way." Peeta took a step towards Haymitch and said, "Why would I want to work with a bunch of people that couldn't give a damn about me and Katniss? All you care about is your own agenda and if it hurts the two of us...oh, well. Tell me why I should trust you any more than I should trust Snow."

"We don't want to pit a bunch of kids against each other and watch them fight to the death," Haymitch knew Peeta had seen right through his insinuation. "I'm sure Katniss would've taken you back regardless of Snow's threat to her, but...kid, you've got to think of everyone here and not just yourself."

"I am thinking about everyone. I'm thinking about you...Effie...Katniss' family...my family...everyone!" Peeta said in a low and defensive voice.

"Tell that to Rue's family...Foxface's family."

Peeta closed his eyes and took a second before repeating Katniss' words to him. "I can't protect everybody."

"But *she* can." Haymitch placed his hand on Peeta's shoulder and said, "Her weapon is a bow and arrow...her unwillingness to play the Games by the Capitol's rules. The people of this country are willing to stand behind her...to fight for her." He lowered his voice. "Your weapon? Words and Snow knows that. He knows that you have the ability to say the right thing...do the right thing and convince this country to follow Katniss' lead. If you don't take this opportunity...it'll be too late, Peeta. You'll never be able to go back and regain the support of the nation. This country is on the verge of an uprising. Whether you like it or not war is in our future." There was urgency in Haymitch's voice as said, "What do you think Katniss will do when the fighting begins? You think she'll just sit back in District Twelve and watch as the rest of us fight? Fighting's in her blood, kid, but if you do this, she'll be fighting alone." He squeezed the spot on Peeta's shoulder where his hand rested and said, "You have the ability to talk this nation into standing behind her...fight beside her. If you throw that away...I don't know what will happen to her, kid."

"This is the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, Haymitch." Peeta lifted his eyes to his mentor and said, "If they're willing to stand behind her and fight...so am I, but I won't pour fuel on the fire Katniss' started. Sorry." Peeta walked back to the train and straight to Katniss' room.

Haymitch was sitting in his room with a bottle in his hand thinking about how much had changed since he first brought Peeta into the rebellion. How scared Peeta was when Haymitch took him to meet with the other mentors while they were still in the Capitol.

*"I don't want to go out with you. We've got the live broadcast of the crowning tonight, Haymitch. Besides, do you really think we should be...you should be drinking beforehand?" Peeta tried to make an excuse as to why they shouldn't leave their quarters, but Haymitch needed him to go with him.*

*"We're going, kid. Now get dressed." Haymitch threw a wig at him and a bright blue suit jacket. "I need a drink and Effie's emptied out all the bottles from our suite."*

*"I'm tired," Peeta whined.*

*"You're young. You've got plenty of time to sleep," Haymitch replied.*

*"I need to be here for my prep team."*

*"Your prep team won't be here for hours."*

*"Maybe I should eat first?"*

*"Eat when you get back."*

*"You're not going to take no for an answer are you?" Peeta asked.*

*"Nope. Might as well humor me, kid." Haymitch pulled a bright yellow wig over his head and said, "I'm even dressing for the occasion." He turned to Peeta and said, "Just don't use my name while we're out."*

*"And what am I supposed to call you?"*

*"I don't really care. You'll think of something to call me."*

*"I already am," Peeta said under his breath. Peeta pulled on his wig and let out a frustrated sigh. "You really think this is going to work? People will know who I am and I don't feel like getting mobbed."*

*"No one is going to recognize us, boy." Haymitch threw his arm over Peeta's shoulder. "Look at us. We'll blend right in."*

*"Freakish birds," Peeta mumbled as he shook his head at their appearance. Haymitch was right. No one knew who they were when they hit the city streets. They blended in with everyone. If anything, they were underdressed.*

*"This way," Haymitch directed Peeta towards an upscale tavern that sat in the middle of a bustling shopping area. Peeta walked to the first table he saw, when he entered, but Haymitch said, "Let's sit in the back. Away from the crowd. Wouldn't want anyone to recognize us."*

*Peeta followed him and sat at a booth. He surveyed the room and noticed the theme of the place: books. "Strange thing to mix with alcohol."*

*"What's that?"*

*"Books. When I think of people getting drunk, I don't think of them reading at the same time." Peeta scratched at the wig.*

*"The place is called the Library. Hence the books."*

*A man walked up to them and asked, "What can I get for you?"*

*Just as Peeta was about to order something, Haymitch cut in. "We still need a few minutes to decide."*

*The man nodded his head and walked away.*

*"Since when do you need time to decide on what you're drinking?" Peeta asked him.*

*"Is it a crime to change up my drink order every now and then?"*

*They both noticed a woman with orange skin coming towards them. "What can I get for you?"*

*Haymitch immediately replied, "I'm looking for the restroom...and a book about wine."*

*"Lucky for you we have both in the back." She made a gesture towards the hallway that led to the furthest part of the bar. "Down the hall and to your right."*

*"Come on, kid. Let's wash up first." Haymitch stood up and began walking.*

*Peeta was a bit hesitant at first then went with Haymitch. "What are we girls now? Going to the bathroom together?" Peeta asked when they walked into the large room.*

*"Shut up and pay attention." Haymitch led them to the large stall that would reveal their hidden destination. The lights flickered and Haymitch placed his hand on a book. "Remember this," he whispered. As he moved around the series of books, Haymitch asked, "Got that?"*

*"I think so," Peeta whispered back and listened as something clicked from inside of the wall. "What the..."*

*Haymitch lifted his fingers to his mouth. "Shh." He waived Peeta forward.*

*When Haymitch lit a candle and handed it to Peeta he asked as quietly as possible, "Where are we?"*

*"Just follow me, kid and be quiet."*

*Peeta's nerves were evident, but he trusted Haymitch and followed him. "What is this place?" He asked as soon as Haymitch shut the door behind them.*

*"Welcome to the rebellion, kid."*

*That was the moment the rebels turned Peeta's world upside down. He stood in the center of the room as several mentors from other districts entered one by one. Cinna and Portia, who had recently been introduced to the rest of the group, entered last. The group explained about the rebellion and how Katniss was quickly becoming the face of it. Her bold moves against the Capitol hadn't gone unnoticed by the people of the nation. How their actions during the Games were inspiring the districts to unite; two tributes displaying unity, an unbroken bond, on national television and fighting to keep the other alive. Their selfless acts had started people thinking and their refusal to die the way the Capitol wanted...threatening to eat the berries, was the spark the people of the country needed to take action.*

*Peeta was told what the rebellion needed him to do in order to protect Katniss, her family...their entire district. He had argued with them. Told them he wouldn't do it, but then he heard the stories from the other mentors. Stories the people in the districts weren't privy to.*



*"You don't get it, Peeta!" Johanna Mason, victor from District Seven, raised her voice to him. "You want to keep Katniss alive? Her family alive? You can either join the rebellion and stop seeing her for a little while, or you can let Snow pimp her out whenever you're at the Capitol, because that's what he'll do. Hell," she threw her hands up in the air and started pacing back and forth. "He'll probably bring you two back more than once a year for the Games and whore her out!" Johanna got in Peeta's face. "Imagine how much money he could get for the Girl on Fire?" She said with a loathsome tone in her voice.*

*"Knock it off, Johanna," Finnick Odair, victor from District Four, said in an easy going voice. The exact opposite of his fellow victor. "Peeta, don't think we want to force your hand here..."*

*"But that's what you're doing!" Peeta stood up and pushed past Johanna. "You're all," he sneered at Portia and Cinna, "...all of you, forcing my hand."*

*Portia walked up behind him and gingerly touched the center of his back. "You know how much we love you and Katniss." Peeta looked at her with sorrow in his eyes. "We would never ask you to do this unless we thought it was for your own good."*

*"My own good, Portia or the rebellion's?" Peeta hung his head. Portia gave Haymitch a shrug and walked towards Cinna.*

*"The rebellion is the best thing for you, kid...for Katniss." Haymitch stood close to a wall and told him, "You think I want you to do this? That I want to keep you two apart? None of us want that. It wouldn't be good for the cause, but we need to keep you alive. We've got to keep Katniss safe from the Capitol's grasp." Haymitch knew Peeta's main concern would be Katniss so that was the card he played.*

*"Listen, boy...none of us want to see what happened to us...to our families, happen to Katniss. She volunteered to save her sister's life*

*by going into the Games. If she were here, don't you think she'd do what she had to, to protect her again? To protect you?"*

*Peeta nodded slowly. "But I'm not Katniss. I didn't volunteer. Effie picked my name out of that bowl."*

*"Suppose she didn't. If your name wasn't drawn would you have stood back and watched as Katniss went into the Games alone, Peeta?"*

*Cinna asked him in his soft spoken voice. "I can't picture you doing that. I believe you would have volunteered for the Games too in order to protect her."*

*"That's what you do, kid," Haymitch followed up Cinna's statement. "You protect her."*

*"He's going to do what he wants," Johanna spit her words out. "Let him be selfish and think of himself...his...girlfriend..." she said as though she were repulsed. "...while the rest of us put our lives on the line for strangers."*

*Finnick gave Johanna a look that said she needed to shut up. "Peeta will do what he thinks is right. We can't tell him what to do," he said. "He's got to figure it out on his own." Finnick walked up to Peeta and shook Peeta's shaky hand. "Congratulations on winning the Games. You and Katniss deserve to live."*

*"They all did." Peeta said softly, "None of them deserved to die."*

*Haymitch made a motion with his head to everyone in the room, telling them to leave. "It's getting late." When the room was cleared of everyone but Peeta and Haymitch he said, "I'm not gonna lie to you kid. Winning the Games gives you riches, but it'll cost you. It cost all of them a hell of a lot more than dying in the arena would've. They had to*

*give up their lives while still living." Haymitch pat Peeta on the shoulder and said, "Let's head out."*

*Haymitch put his hand on the doorknob but Peeta stopped him before he could open the door. "What about you? Everyone here told me about their families...their loved ones...but not you. What did it cost you, Haymitch?"*

*"The same. My family...my girl..." Haymitch hadn't been sure if he should tell Peeta about him and Maysilee. He had never spoken to anyone about it, but he looked Peeta directly in the eyes and said, "You don't know how lucky you are, boy. The girl you love left the arena with you. My girl died in my arms out there."*

*Peeta and Haymitch had left the hidden meeting place, but not before Haymitch showed him the series of books to push and pull that would grant him entrance to the rebel's sanctuary. When Peeta had it memorized they went back to the Tribute Center and acted as if nothing was wrong.*

The choice to join the rebellion without Katniss' knowledge hurt Peeta. Haymitch had spent the first few months they were home watching him slowly withdraw into his own little world. The day after Katniss showed up and punched Haymitch in the eye, the mentor saw a change in both of his tributes. Haymitch could only assume that they had gotten back together, but neither one of them said anything to him and they barely said a word to each other so he pushed that thought out of his head. As long as they kept up appearances, he didn't really care. Now all Haymitch could do was hope and pray that Peeta would change his mind about sticking with the rebellion. There wasn't a selfish bone in Peeta's entire body so he was sure Peeta would come around before the end of the tour. Haymitch silently wished his kids could enjoy their time together. He asked himself what he would do if

he were the one having to make this decision at Peeta's age. He came to the conclusion that he'd do what Peeta was doing. He'd take care of the people he loved first and foremost. Haymitch hadn't told anyone from the rebellion about Snow's visit to Katniss and Peeta. He hadn't had the chance. Now that he knew what Peeta's decision was...he didn't think he'd ever inform the rebellion. Their leader wouldn't be pleased. It was now Haymitch's turn to protect his new family. He put the cap back onto the bottle of whiskey and thought to himself, 'I'll take care of ya, kid. Of both of ya.'

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter 5,**

### **a hunger games**

### **fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Four: His Words Her Actions**

**Hello faithful readers and any new comers that might be lurking!  
Welcome to the Victory Tour! Thanks for all of your reviews,  
opinions, questions...etc... HUGE MONGO Thanks to my betas S**

**and A. Truly remarkable people those two. They keep me on my toes. So let us all give our thanks to my betas! Now it's time to read...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Peeta walked through the snow and onto the train, leaving Haymitch behind in the cold night air. He stomped his feet on the carpeting and headed for Katniss' room. He tapped lightly on her door, but she didn't answer. 'She's probably asleep,' he thought to himself. He turned her doorknob and walked into her room only to find it empty. "Katniss?" he called out as he walked around her quarters. "Katniss, where are you?" She was nowhere to be found. He sat on the edge of her bed and looked down at the legs of his pants. They were soaked through from the snow. He stood up and walked to his room, intending to change his clothes and begin his search for her, but when he opened the door to his room he saw her sitting in the middle of his bed waiting for him.

"Where have you been?" She asked him.

"In your room looking for you," he gave her a soft smile.

"You found me." She stuck her legs out in front of her.

"Yes I did." With each step he took towards her his pulse began racing faster and faster. He sat at the foot of his bed and looked at her. "I'm not dreaming, right? You're here?"

She tilted her head and told him, "Come closer so I can pinch you."

He let out a soft laugh and walked to the side of the bed so he was standing within reaching distance of her. "Are you sure you want to be

here, Katniss?" He didn't believe Haymitch's insinuations about her choice to come back to him, but he asked just the same.

"I'm right where I belong, Peeta." She jumped onto her knees as he pulled her into his arms.

"I'll never leave you again," he whispered hoarsely in her ear.

"Me too. I swear." She clung onto him for dear life.

They stood that way for several minutes, just holding one another, remembering what it felt like to be secure in the other's embrace. They apologized for circumstances that were out of their control. Kissed each other as if they hadn't had the chance to do so for years and said the words I love you over and over again.

When their kisses grew out of control, Peeta forced himself to pull away from her and said, "I should change." He needed to get out of his wet shoes and pants. "You're staying, aren't you?"

Katniss gestured to his dresser where she had a change of clothes and said, "What do you think?"

Peeta saw what she had brought with her and said, "I think I might actually sleep tonight for the first time in six months." He cleaned himself up in his private bathroom, changed into his pajamas and went back into his bedroom. The lights were dim, but not off and Katniss was curled up under the covers. He crawled under and joined her, being careful not to wake her up, but she wasn't asleep.

Katniss rolled over the second he lay down and placed her head against his chest. "I missed this." She ran her hand over his heart. "Listening to your heartbeat...I really missed that."

Peeta wrapped his arms around her and said, "I've missed this too." He ran his hand down her spine and let it rest on her hip. "Just holding you." He closed his eyes. "I felt so empty without you."

She curled her fingers into his pajama shirt and said sleepily, "Me too."

Peeta had been right. For the first time in six months he was able to sleep peacefully. There were no nightmares plaguing his slumber. He didn't wake up in a cold sweat, paralyzed with terror. He did wake up to Katniss screaming at the top of her lungs though.

"Rue! I'm coming, Rue!" Katniss let out a blood curdling scream, "RUUUUUE!"

Peeta shook her, trying to get her to wake up. "Katniss! Please wake up! Come on, Katniss!"

Her whole body was shaking. Her nightshirt was plastered to a patch of sweat in the middle of her chest. She looked around the dark room and wondered where she was. What she was doing there. "Peeta," she cried. "Peeta."

"I'm here," He sat up with her, holding her in his arms. "I'm right here." he stroked her hair, her back. Kissed her ear. "It was just a bad dream. You're safe now."

Katniss buried her face in her hands and bawled her eyes out. Yes, she was safe, but Rue wasn't. She had seen District One's spear enter the little girl's body too many times to count, but that night had been worse than all the others because she was going to have to face Rue's family within the next twelve hours. "I should've saved her. I should've never let her help me take out the Careers' food supply."

"It's not your fault, Katniss. You didn't kill her."

"I might as well have." Katniss turned to face Peeta. "What was I thinking putting that little girl in such a dangerous situation?"

Peeta held her face in his hands and said, "You didn't put her there, okay?" Peeta brushed his thumbs across her cheeks, wiping away her tears. "Okay?"

Katniss nodded at him, knowing that he was right, yet still overwhelmed with guilt. "Okay." Her voice was still shaky.

"Come here," he pulled her down on top of him and stroked her back.

Once Katniss regained some form of composure she asked, "How do I face them, Peeta? How do I face those families?"

"I was wondering the same thing myself," he confessed. "I've written all my speeches except for District Eight and District Five. I even wrote out the one for Four."

"You did?" Katniss was almost envious. "I can't seem to find the right words."

"Yeah." Peeta was going to tell her something he hoped she wouldn't hold against him. "That boy from Four...he was a Career through and through. I stood in the bushes, hiding and listened to him torture some poor girl. All I could think of was...that could be Katniss he's killing. That girl could be somebody's Katniss." He swallowed. "I hated killing those kids, but his death didn't bother me as much as the others did." Katniss looked up at him. "Does that make me a terrible person, Katniss?"

"No," she moved her head from left to right. "I feel the same way about the boy from One."



'Marvel,' Peeta thought, but didn't say. He knew how important it was to their sanity to distance themselves from the kills they had committed in the arena. He didn't know any of his kills names and he didn't want to. That would only make them more...human. Remembering what he had done to them in the arena was more than enough to ingrain them into his life forever. Personalizing all of them would drive him insane. "Sometimes I'm so ashamed of what I did out there and other times...I know I did what I had to do to keep us alive."

"For the most part I can place the blame where it rightly belongs..." Katniss was speaking about the Capitol. "...but then I tell myself, I had a choice to make out there. They were trying to kill us. Some of them actually enjoyed what they were doing. I could've died and let them live, but I chose to fight and come home." She tucked her head under Peeta's chin. "That's not an easy thing to live with."

"No it's not," Peeta agreed.

"But Rue..." Katniss sighed. "She didn't kill anybody. All she ever did was take care of her family."

"Like you."

"She didn't deserve to die the way she did, Peeta," Katniss felt the tears burning the back of her nose again. "Now who'll take care of her brothers and sisters? How will they ever replace their big sister?" Katniss leaned up and said, "She was twelve years old and worked in those fields to support her family. What are they doing now? How are they feeding themselves?"

"I don't know," Peeta felt like the whole world was suddenly resting on his shoulders. He was desperate to take care of Katniss and his extended family, but putting thoughts of people like Rue and her family, out of his mind was beyond him. "Katniss," he leaned down

and whispered in her ear. "If you had a chance to change things...knowing it would put everyone you love in jeopardy... but really change things...would you do it?"

She held her spot for a few minutes and contemplated making a change in the world. Isn't that what she was trying to do on the Victory Tour? Change the mood of the nation so there wouldn't be any unnecessary bloodshed? To prevent uprisings throughout the districts? By agreeing to do what Snow wanted she was knowingly putting her sister in danger of being reaped for future Games, yet still she answered, "Yes. I would."

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"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Effie screamed at the top of her lungs at several Capitol attendants. "Are we or are we not on a Capitol train?"

"Yes, ma'am, but..." One of them said.

"Do not but me! This delay is going to put a kink in our entire schedule!" Effie slammed her clipboard against the table she was standing next to.

She was surrounded by Haymitch, Cinna, Portia, Katniss and Peeta as well as their prep teams.

"Effie, I'm sure we'll..." Cinna tried to calm her down.

"Do you use bubblegum and tape to hold this train together?" Effie continued to yell at the staff disregarding Cinna. "I have never...NEVER seen such a pitiful display as I've seen on this tour! Our dinner last night was lukewarm at best. Katniss and I had to ask

for our breakfast which should've been set out for us and now we've broken down!" Effie stormed through the train car and said, "Well, what is everyone staring at?" The entire room was agape.

Haymitch was the only one that had the nerve to speak. "You're kind of losing it, Effie."

"Oh, don't you start with me!" Effie pushed her fingers into his chest.

"I'm not starting a thing," Haymitch defended himself. "But you're screaming at these people isn't going to make the train move."

"Am I supposed to simply sit on my laurels and wait for them to pull their heads out of their derrieres?" Her false green eyelashes were rapidly blinking. "It's my job to make sure we stay on schedule, not yours!" She yelled at Haymitch. "All you have to do is sit back and get drunk! Which you're an expert at!"

Cinna, Portia, Katniss and Peeta all exchange curious looks at one another.

"Listen here, sweetheart..." Haymitch had enough of the escort's outburst. "I haven't had one drink today."

"Someone call the President! He'll have to declare this day a holiday! Haymitch hasn't had a drink before nine in the morning!" Effie turned to the staff and asked quite loudly, "When is this heap of a contraption going to be up and running again?"

"Two hours ma'am." One of them said.

"One..." the other said. "We should have it fixed in one hour."

"Well, it better be or the two of you will have some answering to do!" She stormed towards the train's door that led outside. She pulled on

the handle but it didn't budge. "Would somebody please open this damn door?" One of the attendants released the safety latch and opened the door. Effie turned and threw her clipboard across the train car, which narrowly missed Haymitch and stomped down the track until she was far enough away from everyone to recompose herself without an audience.

The attendants quickly left the car and went to work as Haymitch turned to face the entire team from District Twelve. "Anyone know what got her panties in a wad?"

Katniss smirked and mimicked Effie's Capitol accent, "We're not going to be on schedule and it's a big big big day."

"Stop it, Katniss," Peeta scolded her to which Katniss shrugged and ate a handful of grapes.

"Someone should go after her," Portia said to Haymitch.

"Don't look at me. That woman hates my guts," he pointed in the direction Effie disappeared.

"I'll go," Katniss said with a smirk.

"Sit your ass down, sweetheart," Haymitch grimaced. "Son of a bitch! Why is it always me that has to deal with you women?" He walked down the track and found Effie wiping at her nose with a handkerchief.

"If you wouldn't mind leaving me alone..." she said in a shaky voice.

"Trust me, I'd like to." Haymitch stood behind her thinking this would be a perfect time to have his first drink of the day.

"Then please do so," Effie sniffed.

Haymitch looked behind him to see if anyone was watching them. When he was satisfied that they were alone, he took Effie by the arm and walked her further down the track. "What the hell was that about? And don't tell me you're crying over a train delay."

Effie shook her head causing her pumpkin colored wig to shimmy. "No." She lifted her fingers to her throat and said, "Oh, I behaved so badly."

"You behaved like you used to," Haymitch told her. "Which is a good thing, but there's something going on with you..."

"Yes, there is." Effie squared her shoulders and told Haymitch what she had intended on telling him when she showed up at his house before they left for the tour. "I'm quitting, Haymitch."

"Because the train broke down?" Haymitch asked as though she were ridiculous. "That's a little extreme, don't you think?"

"No, not because of the train. Because..." Effie stared at a pebble next to her pointy toed shoe and said, "Because of Katniss and Peeta."

"What'd they do?" Haymitch would chew them out if they had caused Effie any grief. Effie might not have been his favorite person in the world, but she had proven herself to him many times over.

"They..." she sniffed. "They made me love them."

Haymitch couldn't believe what he was hearing. Of all the things he'd heard come out of Effie Trinket's mouth over the years, this was the silliest. "So what? So you love them. What's the big deal?"

"You don't understand, Haymitch." Effie stared at him and spoke in a low and determined tone. "I can't continue to watch them go through

this. That girl screams at night. Do you know that? She screams at the top of her lungs for the tributes that died in the arena and that boy...Did you see his paintings? Portia told me that's what he paints at night. He paints the Games...his nightmares."

"At least they're not drinking," Haymitch looked almost humiliated.

"Not yet," Effie said. "How long did it take you before you gave into your nightmares and began drinking?"

"Those kids are much better people than I ever was." Haymitch pointed towards the train. "Plus they've got each other to help them through the hard times."

"And who do I have?" Effie asked so quietly she didn't know if Haymitch heard her. "Who will be there to help me through?"

"You've got your friends at the Capitol you can spend time with...take your mind off of things."

"Please, Haymitch." Effie shook her head. "You know as well as I do that I'm left alone to face everything that has happened. Cinna and Portia have each other and you and I...we're left alone with nothing for company, but our thoughts." Effie paused and said, "I'll be giving my notice when the tour is through. I can't be a part of the Quarter Quell."

Haymitch felt his nerves stand on end. "You have to be a part of it, Effie." It shocked the hell out of him, but Haymitch needed Effie Trinket on his side. "You can't quit."

"They'll find someone else for you. Escorts will be lining up to take my job with Katniss and Peeta as mentors."

"You don't understand, Effie." Haymitch didn't know how to explain her importance to the rebellion without coming right out and telling her about it. "Do you really want to leave Katniss and Peeta in the hands of...of some Capitol lap dog?" He needed someone that actually cared about his pair during the Quarter Quell. Someone he could trust, and to his dismay, Effie Trinket was that person.

"Katniss and Peeta will be fine. You may not fair so well...but such is life." Effie wiped her handkerchief under her nose and apologized. "I'm sorry. I know this isn't fair to you, but I must do this. I simply must." She began to walk away.

"Effie, wait." Haymitch said, stopping her before she could get back on the train. "What if you weren't alone? What if there were a bunch of people that felt the same way as you? Would you stay then?"

"But there aren't, Haymitch."

Haymitch was taking a big chance, but he told Effie, "There are more than you know. Hundreds...thousands of us that don't like what's happening in our country." He pulled her close to him and whispered. "We need you to keep your position, Effie."

"I don't understand what you're getting at, Haymitch." Effie was completely lost.

"Will you do me a favor? Can you just keep acting like your old self for awhile longer? I need to talk with some people first, but..."

"I'm quitting, Haymitch. There's nothing you can say, short of promising to end the Games that will stop me."

"That's our plan." Effie's jaw dropped when she heard Haymitch tell her, "We've been trying to end the Games for years, but it wasn't until

Katniss and Peeta entered the arena and showed the nation that a couple of kids could make a difference..."

"Who is we?" Effie whispered.

Haymitch hoped he wasn't jeopardizing anything when he said, "The rebellion."

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"They're glorious!" Octavia exclaimed. "Simply marvelous!"

"Did you see the one of Clove?" Camellia, one Peeta's prep team asked. "He really captured her deceit. And the one of the mutation?" She clapped her hand against her leg. "I swear I felt like I was right there in the arena with them when I saw that."

"Peeta is gifted," Portia agreed with them. "But I much prefer the ones of Katniss. I think those speak to who he really is more than the others."

Cinna nodded and said, "I agree, Portia. He seemed to capture her spirit on those canvases."

Katniss stood at the doorway and listened to everyone talking about her and Peeta as though they weren't in the room. She glanced at Peeta and saw him studying the empty glass he had in his hand. She took it from him and said, "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Peeta asked her as she took his hand in hers.

"You're going to show me your paintings." Katniss had an idea of what Peeta painted and his steadfast determination of not showing them to



her, led her to believe she was about to witness Peeta's nightmares for herself.

"You don't want to see them, Katniss." He stopped walking.

"Everyone else has seen them...is talking about them. Now don't you think it's strange that the woman you love hasn't seen them?" She pulled his hand and said, "You're showing them to me...now."

Peeta took her to the train car that was full of his paintings. "Here they are," his voice was full of sorrow.

Katniss peered around the room and studied them. Peeta had brought the Games back to life. She walked from one to another examining them. "How do you remember all of this so clearly?" She was looking at the picture of Clove arranging her knives in a vest and thought the girl from Peeta's prep team was right on the money when she said that he had captured Clove's deceit.

"I see them every night." Peeta walked up to one of the paintings and put his hand on it. "This one, I only saw once, but I had to get it out of my head."

Katniss did a double take of the picture he was standing next to. It was Prim standing with her arms out, crying. She was surrounded by hundreds of faceless children of District Twelve. Peeta had painted the reaping. Katniss could hear Prim's cry, begging her not to volunteer. "Prim," she whispered.

"I told them not to bring this one. I didn't want anyone to see it, but they brought it anyway."

She turned away from it and looked at the rest of them. Peeta's hands digging for roots. Katniss high in a tree. "I'm everywhere." She walked

up to the picture of herself sitting on the rock staring at the blue flower that matched Peeta's eyes.

"I see you every night in my dreams." He looked down at his feet.

"Does it help? Painting them out?"

Peeta shrugged. "I tell myself it does, but I don't really know." He walked around the room and said, "The one thing I do know is that I don't want to end up like Haymitch. I'd rather wake up with a paintbrush in my hand than a knife."

Katniss turned to him and saw the disappointment in his face. "Peeta, these are remarkable. I hate them, but they're truly astounding."

He let out a little laugh. "Do you really hate them?"

Katniss looked past his shoulder and saw one that she loved. "Our date." She walked to it. "You painted our date." She trailed her fingers down the picture of the leaky cave wall that Peeta had pointed out to her while they were in the cave.

"I told you, you had an artistic eye." He walked up behind her and took her hand. "This one I painted after we had lunch under the oak tree together. This was actually a good memory for me." He paused and asked, "Is that weird?"

She shook her head and said, "No. I know we were in the middle of the arena, but...those few hours...being there with you...it felt like the happiest place on earth." Katniss took one more look around the room and saw the mutt version of Gale. It turned her stomach. She remembered when the mutation ripped Peeta's leg open and how much blood there was. "I can't look at these anymore."

"You don't have to." He lifted her fingers to his lips. "So you really hate them?"

"Yes...not all of them," she trailed her hand along the edge of the cave painting. "I'm going to want this one when we get home."

"It's very expensive," he grinned at her. "But I think we can work out a deal."

"You want to see my talent?" She asked with a smile on her face.

He pulled her against him and said in a teasing manner, "I already know your talent."

She rolled her eyes at him and said, "You haven't seen the clothes Cinna...I mean...I've designed yet."

Peeta let out a laugh and said, "Later. We're coming up on District Eleven. Let's go take a look."

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Haymitch knew he had done the right thing by talking to Effie about the rebellion. Normally he'd have discussed it with the rest of his group, but the way Effie was acting...he knew he had to make an executive decision on the spot.

"How many of you are there?" Effie asked quietly under her breath.

"Enough to make a difference," Haymitch told her.

Effie looked at the train, which was stopped on the tracks and turned to Haymitch. "What do I need to do?"

He smiled when he saw defiance in her eyes. "What you've been doing. I've got to talk to the rest of the group, but Effie...you can't quit. We need you."

She raised her chin and said, "If keeping my job means I can make a difference, then I'll stay."

"That a girl, Effie." Haymitch gave her a rap on the shoulder. "Now, let's go back in there and keep up appearances."

"I should apologize for my behavior." Effie gave her head a quick shake and corrected herself. "No. I should go in there and act like you've insulted me." She threw Haymitch's hand off of her arm and let out a yell, "Don't touch me! You are a repulsive little man!" She called out to him as she stormed back to the train. "Have they finished yet?" She demanded when she walked back into the train car.

"Not yet," Cinna said hesitantly.

"Well, what's keeping them?" She looked around and said, "And where are our victors?"

"Taking some time for themselves," Portia told her.

"You would think those two would be more concerned about our tardiness." Effie huffed. "Just goes to show, you can take the tributes out of the district, but you can't take the district out of the tributes." She retrieved her clipboard and said, "I'm going to my quarters. Someone find me the minute this tin can is working again."

Portia raised her eyebrows at Haymitch when he came into the compartment. Haymitch gave her a cocky grin and shrugged his shoulder. "Well, you can't say I didn't try." He walked to the table that held the alcoholic beverages he craved so much and looked them

over, deciding which one he was going to start with. "Ah, whiskey. The cure all of Effie's fits." He poured a glass of it and took a sip. It didn't taste as good as he'd usually did.

"What's the weather like out there?" Cinna asked him, wanting to go outside and catch Haymitch up on the events of the rebellion effort in the Capitol.

"Nice," Haymitch replied with a curious expression. "If you're looking to get out for awhile, I'd recommend doing it now."

"What do you say, Portia? Feel like taking a little stroll?" Cinna asked his partner.

"That sounds lovely." She picked up her sketchpad and said, "Haymitch why don't you join us? You can give us your opinion on some of the garments we've designed for Katniss and Peeta."

There was nothing more for them to design as far as Haymitch knew, so their implication was clear. They wanted to talk to him in private. Haymitch would rather drink himself to sleep, the night before had been restless at best, but he went with them. They had traveled down the train tracks, far enough away not to worry about prying ears or eyes. "What's up?" He wasn't sure if he should tell them about Effie or not. He'd let them start the conversation and go from there.

"Is Effie all right?" Portia asked before they got onto more pressing business.

"She will be," Haymitch kept quiet about her being aware of the rebellion.

Cinna was satisfied with Haymitch's answer and started to relay the details of their upcoming tour. "We've got confirmation about the

activities in Eight. Several other districts will be trying something similar...testing the boundaries so to speak."

"Which ones?" Haymitch asked, not knowing the extent of how much the rebellion had progressed. There was only so much information that could be sent to him now that Seneca Crane was dead and they were using Peeta's canvases as a means of communication.

"Districts Three and Four are a lock. There's another district that may be taking action, but we're still uncertain of which one it is and what their plans are," Portia said quietly.

"You guys have been busy," Haymitch looked back at the train. No one was watching, but just in case he stuck his hand out for Portia to hand him her sketchbook. He began flipping through it, aimlessly. "Do we know how the uniforms are coming along in Eight?"

"They've got a few more pieces to get together, but they're working on it. No matter what, they'll be ready to go," Cinna stood next to Haymitch and pointed at something in the book and continued talking. "The slow down of production in the factories throughout the districts will take effect simultaneously as soon as the Victory Tour is over."

"Do we have all the districts in on this?" Haymitch asked and handed Portia her book back taking Cinna's in its place.

"Most of them," Portia told him. "We do have one problem though..." Portia glanced up at Cinna and said, "Plutarch Heavensbee."

Haymitch's eyes flew to theirs. "What's wrong? Did Snow..." Haymitch lowered his voice down even more. "Did Snow find out about him?"

"No," Cinna flipped one of the pages in his book. "We've been having a hard time getting word to him. Since being made Head Gamemaker, he's been surrounded by Snow's people."

"How'd we get to Crane when he had that job?" Haymitch asked.

"We used Plutarch. He was just a Gamemaker then." Portia told him. "Haymitch, we need someone close to the Games..." Portia paused and said, "...someone that wouldn't look suspicious when striking up a conversation with him."

Cinna finished Portia's suggestion. "Someone like a Capitol escort."

Haymitch gave them a smile and said, "Good thing I talked her out of quitting and into joining our side then."

Portia and Cinna spoke at the same time. "You what?"

Haymitch gave them a brief rundown on Effie's status and finished it up with. "She doesn't know you two are a part of it. She doesn't know any specific names. Her only worry was what she had to do to help out Katniss and Peeta."

Portia put her arm through Cinna's and said, "I was just telling Peeta how lucky we are to have her on our side."

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"Stop laughing at me!" Katniss gave Peeta a condemning look.

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at the situation." Peeta grinned and imagined Katniss in the center of her prep team being 'plucked like a chicken ready to roast.' He let out another snort of laughter.

"You're sleeping alone tonight," she walked past him and into the last train car.

"Aw, come on." He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her back against his front. "It's just funny. You being tortured while I get to sleep in."

"I didn't find that very humorous this morning when Effie was pounding on your door."

"No, but you found Effie's expression funny when she saw that we spent the night together." Peeta grinned at the shocked expression on their escort's face.

"She looked like she swallowed a goose egg," Katniss rested her head against his shoulder. "I got a lecture on that, by the way." She rested her hands on the arms he wrapped around her waist. "Be grateful that I was the only one up, Katniss. Mischievous behavior like this is what starts rumors flitting about," Katniss did her best Effie Trinket impersonation. "And have you thought about the consequences that..." Katniss lowered her voice down like Effie had early that morning. "...sleeping with that boy could entail? Hmmm?"

"She said that?" Peeta's eyes flew open.

"Oh, yeah." Katniss turned around to face him. "I was going to tell her that nothing happened, but...I rather enjoyed seeing her squirm."

Peeta chuckled and said, "Be nice to Effie, Katniss. She helped us out a lot in the arena."

"I know," Katniss resigned. "But she's so...prissy. It's fun watching her get flustered. I thought people from the Capitol weren't that..." Katniss



shrugged. "...guess I just thought they were a little more...out there when it came to things like...you know."

"You know? You mean sex?" Peeta watched as Katniss' face turned bright red.

"Shh," Katniss turned away from him. "Don't say it."

"It's not like saying the word is going to break any laws. It's a natural part of life."

Katniss squirmed her way out of Peeta's hold and walked away from him. "Not part of my life."

"No one said it was," Peeta chose to tread very lightly on this subject. He put his hands on her shoulders and said, "If I've ever given you the impression that we...we should...I'm sorry." He turned her to face him. "I'm happy with our relationship just the way it is." She just looked out the window and stood there. "And if you ever feel like I've gotten carried away...or have gone too far...just tell me to stop and I promise I will."

"What if I get carried away?" Katniss was ashamed to admit she had gone a little too far the night before. Thankfully Peeta excused himself and changed into his pajamas.

"Then I'll stop you...if you want me to."

"Stop me," Katniss regained eye contact with him. "Definitely stop me."

Peeta rested his forehead against hers and said, "What if you don't want to stop?"

"Peeta...I never want to stop, but I'm not an idiot. I know what happens when people get carried away and...I'm not having a baby. And I'm definitely not having one while I'm single."

"Are you asking me to marry you, Katniss?" Peeta bit back his laughter.

"No!" She was uncomfortable with their entire conversation. "I'm not getting married, remember?"

"You don't want a boyfriend either yet here I am." He placed a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"Shut up, Peeta," she mumbled.

He looked through the large windows which were designed to retract into the ceiling so the passengers could ride outdoors. "Too bad birth control is illegal in the districts."

"Peeta!" Katniss smacked a hand against his chest. "That's not funny!"

He was laughing as he said, "The expression on your face is though."

"Now you're sleeping alone tomorrow night too." She pushed the button that controlled the windows, sat on a sofa and patted the empty spot next to her. "You'll be lucky if I even sit with you at dinner tonight."

Peeta took the spot next to her and pulled her into his arms. "Oh, yeah. You're really mad at me." He kissed her head.

"Furious," She tucked her feet under her legs and curled into him. "I'm livid," she sighed as she enjoyed the fresh air and her company.

"Mmmm...I always did like your feisty side," he smiled as he watched the fields come into view. "We're slowing down," Peeta noticed the decrease in the train's speed.

"Maybe we're pulling into the station?" The thought was quickly put to rest when they saw a large fence; at least thirty feet high rise up before them. They both sat up to get a better look at it. "Look at that wire," Katniss pointed out the coils of barbed wire at the top of the fence.

"Forget the wire; look at the bottom of it." The fence was lined with larger versions of the plates the Capitol used on the tribute's platforms.

Peeta's eyes traveled up to the multiple watchtowers, spaced evenly apart and manned with armed guards. "That's something different."

Katniss saw what he was looking at and said, "Guess they want to keep everyone...safe." She had almost said imprisoned, but stopped herself knowing that the Capitol was probably listening into their conversation.

They sat back and watched as the fields turned into crops stretched out into the distance. Men, women and children wearing straw hats stopped their work to study the train passing by.

"Look over there," Peeta pointed to rows and rows of fruit trees.

"I wonder if that's where Rue..." Katniss didn't finish her thought. She didn't have to.

Peeta pat her hand and said, "She's safe now, Katniss. No one can hurt her anymore."

Katniss nodded her head, but the feeling of loss filled her soul. Loss for a young girl that had taken up a miniscule portion of her life yet changed it forever. She thought of Rue teaching her the four note song she sang at quitting time while working in the fields. "Do you think someone else sings her song now, Peeta?"

He couldn't answer. All he could do was look at his surroundings. The debilitated shacks that made the Seam look like Victor's Village, the tiniest of children working in the fields and the Peacekeepers...everywhere. Flashes of their white uniforms stuck out like sore thumbs amongst the various colors of nature. "What is that?" He spoke to himself as he stood up to get a better view.

"What?" Katniss made a motion to stand, but Peeta stopped her.

"It's nothing." It wasn't nothing; it was a line of whipping posts. Peeta imagined Thresh being strapped up by his arms and taking a beating for dropping a basket of fruit. Rue's basket. 'They would've killed that little girl if they whipped her,' Peeta thought to himself. He sat back down next to Katniss and felt the bile rising in his throat.

"How many people do you think live here?" Katniss asked after a half an hour of traveling through the vast district.

"In school they just call it a large district. They never say how many people live here though."

"How do you suppose they hold the reaping with this many kids?" Katniss asked thinking they had to have some type of preliminary drawings before the actual event.

Peeta just shook his head. He turned to look at Katniss, who was wearing a comfortable traveling suit which probably cost more than what these families earned in their lifetime and thought, 'This is so

much bigger than just you and me, Katniss. It's not just the Games these people have to worry about, it's life. The life the Capitol forces on them. We can change all of that.' Peeta pulled her head against his lips and placed a firm kiss against the top of her hair. "I love you."

Katniss held onto him and said, "I love you too." This whole scenario was too much. She felt sick knowing there were people out there...people like Rue...that had to work and live in such an environment. She longed to go back home to District Twelve. To take shelter in the woods. Even if Snow had cameras or listening devices out there, it was still better than what she was witnessing in District Eleven. "I can't wait to go back home," she whispered in his ear.

"Me too," he whispered back.

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"Give me a minute with the kid, will ya?" Haymitch said to Peeta's prep team who had just finished getting Peeta ready for his introduction to District Eleven.

"Oh, Haymitch," Portia said as she walked into Peeta's room. "Effie's looking for you."

"Yeah, I need a sec with the kid here," he guided Portia to the door. "We'll only be a second." He shut the door and turned around to face Peeta. "Damn. I'll never understand why they need so many people to get a guy ready."

"What do you want, Haymitch?" Peeta knew what Haymitch wanted. He wanted him to change his mind about taking President Snow up on his offer.

"Just wanted to wish you luck, kid. Going out there isn't going to be easy...facing those families, but you'll do fine."

"Luck?" Peeta flicked his thumb across the little cardboard cards he had written his speech on. "That's it?"

"That's it, kid." Haymitch walked up to him and stuck his hand out. Peeta took it in his and shook it. "You two are a great pair. I couldn't be prouder of you both. You did what you needed to do to stay alive, and that's all I ever wanted...for you to stay alive." Haymitch dropped Peeta's hand and said, "You're gonna do great, boy."

"Oh, Katniss. You look breathtaking," Effie held her hands up to her throat at the sight of her. "Cinna has outdone himself."

Katniss looked down at the orange dress adorned with autumn colored leaves and said, "I think Peeta's going to love this one the most."

"Don't think. Know," Cinna smiled as he replaced her orange headband with a gold one. "Much better." He looked around the train car and asked, "Where is our male victor?"

"I don't know," Effie pursed her lips. "Portia went into his room some time ago and...Oh...there he is now." Effie held her hands out to him and captured his in hers. "Smashing! Just smashing! The two of you are going to be wonderful out there."

Peeta walked up to Katniss and looked her up and down. "Holy cow. This is my favorite dress by far." He leaned down and placed a kiss on her cheek. "Did you tell Cinna this was my favorite color?"

"No. Portia did," Cinna answered as he walked behind Peeta. "Now I've worked very hard on her, so don't mess up her make up." He gave

Peeta a tap against his shoulder blade and pinned the mockingjay pin to Katniss' dress. "There we go. All finished."

"You're beautiful," Peeta said to Katniss.

"Thanks to Cinna and my prep team," Katniss flushed.

Peeta walked closer to her and said, "Just say thank you." Then he said to her again, "You're beautiful."

"Seriously, Peeta...you're..."

"Katniss. Stop talking and listen. We're going to try this again. I'm going to tell you how nice you look and you're just going to say, thank you, Peeta. Now let's try it." Peeta took her hands in his and gazed into her eyes. "You look so beautiful, Katniss."

She lifted up the corners of her mouth in a soft smile and said, "Thank you, Peeta." There were sighs coming from their prep teams who were sitting across the room watching the whole thing play out.

"Why is it, you only listen to him?" Haymitch took a swallow of the drink he was carrying. "You're going to have to teach me how to do that, kid...get her to stop arguing and just listen."

Katniss scowled at Haymitch and sent him an evil glare, "Go to hell, Haymitch."

Peeta kissed Katniss' temple and said, "Now why would I do that? I like her fiery side." The room started laughing and Effie started worrying.

"What is taking them so long? We should already be making our way onto the platform and into our waiting cars." Effie complained just as the doors to the train opened. "Well, it's about time."

They were greeted with a group of Peacekeepers. Haymitch, Effie, Katniss and Peeta were walked across the train's platform, surrounded by the armed guards and taken into an armored truck, leaving Cinna, Portia and both prep teams behind to watch the live feed on the train's television screens.

"This is new," Haymitch mumbled under his breath to Effie as they were ushered up the stairs to the back of the waiting vehicle.

Once the doors were closed Effie said, "Really, you'd think we were all criminals." She wondered for a moment if the Capitol thought that way about them and was giving them a taste the lifestyle.

Peeta sat with Katniss' hand in his. They were both nervous. They exchanged concerned glances more than once while on the ride to the Justice Building. They were walked through the old, decrepit building and towards the front entrance. Microphones were placed on their garments and then it was show time.

"...victor's from the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games...Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark," the mayor of District Eleven introduced them to the crowd.

"Big smiles," Effie nudged them out the door and sent Haymitch a nervous look. She had been on edge ever since entering that particular district with their barbed wire fence and overly eager Peacekeepers. Ever since her talk with Haymitch earlier that morning.

Effie couldn't have been prouder of Katniss and Peeta as they held their heads up high and faced the first of many families in mourning. Peeta would take all of them to heart, but this particular district would be especially hard on Katniss. Both Thresh and Rue had saved her life in the arena and Katniss had made a special bond with the young girl. Effie held her breath as she listened to them spew out line after



line the Capitol had made them memorize in order to keep the residents of the district in their place. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, berating herself for ever believing the victors in years past had been speaking from their hearts when reciting similar words. Effie turned to the live feed on the television screen located next to the doors of the Justice Building and watched Peeta as he spoke to first Thresh's family then Rue's. She had read over his speech both last night and this morning, making sure that it was appropriate. But he didn't read his speech...he simply did what he did best. He spoke. Peeta was being himself and Effie couldn't have been prouder. When Katniss spoke Effie knew in the recesses of her heart that she had done the right thing by agreeing to join Haymitch and the rebellion. She wiped away the tears from her eyes as she listened to Katniss' gut wrenching speech and thought, 'I'd fight to the death for you, darling child. For both of you.'

Haymitch watched through the opened doors of the building as the two were greeted with controlled applause. Katniss and Peeta made it to the end of the stage and he listened as they recited by memory the speech the Capitol had prepared for them. Peeta sounded like his charming self and Katniss like she was reading aloud from a book. 'Come on, sweetheart. Don't blow this,' he thought to himself. Haymitch could see the families of both dead tributes sitting on a special platform. He remembered having to go through this same event and how much he had hated it. He was fourteen...a victor of the Hunger Games and everyone he loved had been killed by the Capitol for his winning...his mistake. Peeta took a breath when Katniss was through and studied the families of the dead tributes. His eyes lingered on Rue's.

"I'd like to take this chance to tell you...both of these families how very grateful I am for their sacrifice," Peeta spoke in his soft and simple way. "Thresh..." he looked at the dead boy's family and poured out his

sympathies. He looked to Rue's family and did the same. Then he looked at Katniss and mouthed, 'I love you,' before saying something that saturated the fire they started in the nation with a ton of fuel. When Katniss spoke, she stoked the flames without even knowing it and at the end of their speeches Haymitch listened as the people from District Eleven stood up to the Capitol along side of his kids.

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"This way, Mr. Mellark. Miss. Everdeen." They were being ushered through the Justice Building of District Eleven. "We just need to get you to the front of the building and get you wired for sound."

Katniss and Peeta held hands through the entire walk, not wanting to lose hold on the other. They stood side by side as the microphones were clipped onto their clothes and gripped their hands even tighter. They heard their introduction yet stood in place.

"Big smiles," Effie pushed them out the door and onto the stage.

Katniss felt like her face was going to crack she was smiling so big. It was forced, but she hoped President Snow would look past that and take notice of her, oh so happy to be there attitude.

Peeta's smile was as phony as Effie's pumpkin colored wig, but he followed his escort's advice since it seemed to have saved him and Katniss in the arena. "Thank you," he held up his hand to the crowd that was obviously applauding because it was required of them to do so. He knew...he had been in their position for years. Cheering for victors that had killed members of their district. Peeta wanted to vomit as he spoke the prepared statement the Capitol gave them. "The Hunger Games are brought to us once a year as a way of

encouraging peace throughout the districts." The Games were there to put the districts in their place not to promote peace. "We tributes take these Games as a serious part of our heritage and understand that to sacrifice ourselves in the arena will prevent our great nation of Panem from the events that occurred during the dark days and keep all of us free to live the way we were meant to." 'The way we were meant to,' he thought to himself. 'As slaves to President Snow.' "As free men and women. Proud of our heritage. Proud of our country." Peeta was surprised he didn't lose his lunch on the stage.

Katniss blocked out what Peeta was saying. She couldn't believe the things the Capitol had wanted them to say. She felt Peeta squeeze her hand and saw him give her a little nod. It was her turn to recite lies. "As one of the victors of the Hunger Games, I am proud to have served my country in its quest to keep peace throughout the districts." 'Proud? Of murdering other children?' Katniss thought to herself. 'God forgive me for the things they're making me say...the things the Capitol made me do.' "And it is all of our duty to remember that no matter what the cost," she couldn't look at Thresh or Rue's family. She just couldn't stomach it. "It is worth it as long as we live in a nation free of tyranny and injustice." Katniss swallowed the lump that had been forming in her throat since they stepped off of the train. "We are proud to be victors of the Hunger Games. Proud to have served our great nation of Panem." How she didn't puke when saying the last part was a mystery to her. "Proud to have served our President as he continues to provide us with a free country."

The applause was more than forced, it was required. Peeta looked down at Thresh's family and saw their stiff backs, crossed arms and tight jaws. Rue's family was another story. Her mother and father sat on the platform the Capitol had provided surrounded by their remaining children. All of whom could be reaped. Their tiny frames, huge eyes and mournful expressions were more than Peeta could

take. He thought of Prim. If he and Katniss hadn't won, she would be sitting on a platform just like that, trying to be proud instead of hurting from the devastating loss of her sister. He had written a speech...kept it simple like President Snow told him to do, but Peeta didn't reach for the note cards that were in his pocket. Instead he looked at their families and spoke from his heart. "I'd like to take this chance to tell you...both of these families how very grateful I am for their sacrifice," Peeta took a deep breath. "Thresh," he looked down at the two women with their arms crossed. "I don't know what to say except thank you. Thresh saved Katniss' life and by doing so, my own. He could've walked away from Katniss with the backpack that held my medicine and quite possibly won these Games. Instead he saved us..." Peeta squeezed Katniss' hand. "Both of us and that's why I'm standing here today." He turned to Rue's family and said, "No one expected a tiny little thing like Rue to make it to the final eight, but she did." Peeta grinned with pride. "She showed them all...outsmarted the Careers by saving Katniss' life with the tracker jacker nest thus saving my life too. I didn't get the chance to know her as well as I'd have liked, but she..." Peeta blinked quickly so as not to let the tears he was building up in the back of his eyes, fall. "...she gave Katniss something in that arena...faith in the kindness of strangers. She was her friend and nursed her back to health. To me, that shows the kind of child you raised...were raising," Rue was far from being an adult. Peeta was ready to take a stand. Not only for Katniss, but for all the children...people of their nation. "Rue was an example of strength and courage and I am humbled by what she taught me...by what she taught us all."

It was as though everyone's words were going through Peeta's mind all at once. He heard Johanna saying, *"Let him be selfish and think of himself...his...girlfriend...while the rest of us put our lives on the line for strangers."*

Finnick saying, *"Peeta will do what he thinks is right."*

Prim telling him, *"If it were up to you, Peeta, you'd have tried to save everyone in the arena. That's just who you are."*

Haymitch as he suggested, *"Imagine if you were your normal self on the tour...if you did show your compassionate side, but for someone other than Katniss? Do you know what that would do for this nation? You'd be giving them hope, kid. Showing them that one act of kindness can change Panem."*

And Katniss. Her words seemed to echo through him, *"Now who'll take care of her brothers and sisters? How will they ever replace their big sister?"* 'We will, Katniss. We'll take care of them,' he thought. 'We're going to take care of all the children of this country.' He turned to face her and mouthed, "I love you," then turned back to Thresh and Rue's families. "It can in no way replace your losses, but as a token of our thanks, Katniss and I would like for each of the tributes' families from District Eleven to receive one month of our winnings every year for the duration of our lives." Regardless of Snow's threats, Peeta knew he'd have done something like this anyway. It's who he was. He felt Katniss kiss his cheek and he looked into her eyes, hoping she'd forgive him for the hell that was about to rain down on them.

Katniss couldn't have loved Peeta more in that moment. He was everything their President wasn't. 'Everything you're not,' she thought to herself as she was handed a plaque by the mayor and set down the flowers she had been given by some little girls when she and Peeta had walked on stage. Peeta was kind, good and most of all selfless. The mayor made a gesture with his arm showing them the way off of the stage, but Katniss couldn't move. Rue's little sister was standing at the edge of their platform, waiting like a bird ready to take flight. "Wait," she stumbled forward grasping the large plaque to her chest.

"Wait, please." Katniss licked her dry lips and faced Thresh's family. "I want to give my thanks to the tributes of District Eleven. I didn't know Thresh, but I knew of him...of his actions not only in the arena but out of them. Rue had told me what he had done for her...how he had..." she knew she had to be careful with her words, "...helped her." The two women were staring at Katniss as though they understood what she was getting at. "I had a great deal of respect for Thresh. For the way he played the Games...on no one else's terms but his own. The Careers wanted him to team up with them from the very beginning, but he wouldn't do it." Katniss noticed the older of the two women hinting at a smile. "He saved my life. He handed me Peeta's life when he gave me his medicine and for that I will be eternally grateful." She turned to look at Rue's family and tried her best to hold back her tears. "But Rue...Rue was my friend. I feel as though I've known her my whole life and she'll always be with me. Everything beautiful brings her to mind. I see her in the yellow flowers that grow in the meadow by my house. I see her in my sister, Prim. But most of all I hear her when the mockingjays sing." Katniss hadn't expected to do it, but she opened her mouth and sang Rue's four note song, leaving the haunting melody hanging in the air as though Rue had come back to signal the end of their work day for the last time. Her voice was shaky at best when she said to the crowd, "Thank you for your children and thank you for the bread."

There was no applause after Katniss spoke, only dead silence until somewhere in the crowd she heard a voice. It was old and crackly, but she recognized the song.

"Deep in the meadow, hidden far away. A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray." Several voices joined the old man's as he sang the final verse of the song she had sung to Rue as she died in the arena. By the time the last two lines were sung the entire district had joined in. "Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true. Here

is the place where I love you." Katniss could feel her pulse racing as the entire district lifted their three middle fingers to their lips and raised them to her. It was the symbol of her district...the one she had held up to the cameras after Rue had died.

A combination of panic and dread flooded through her as she felt Peeta's hand on her arm gently tugging her towards their exit.

He placed his arm around her waist and whispered to her, "Are you all right?" How he kept his voice steady he'd never know. Katniss' actions had spoken more than his words ever could.

"Yeah...I'm just a little dizzy. The sun was so bright," she lied as she thought of President Snow's warning to her about the districts and their thoughts of rebelling. She hadn't meant to stir up trouble. She just wanted to say her thanks. "I forgot my flowers," she mumbled absentmindedly.

"I'll get them," Peeta stopped and Katniss waited. They turned to the opened doors where Haymitch and Effie stood watching them on a live feed, just in time to see a group of Peacekeepers forcing the old man that had sung Katniss' song to his knees at the base of the stage and watched as a bullet went through his head.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter 6,**

# **a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

## **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

### **Chapter Five: Reprocussions**

**Sorry, it took so long, but I've been a bit busy. I'm in the process of setting up a tumblr page on the advice of a reviewer. Thank you for the suggestion! I'll update my profile page when it's done. So here's chapter five and I'd like to say thank you to all of you for reading and reviewing...your r&r if you will. Thank you to my wonderful betas! S and A I am nothing without you! Now...shall we read...**

## **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

"Why do you think they cut the feed when that man started to sing?" Flavius asked the rest of the group on the train.

"I don't know, but I can't wait to watch their speeches again. Peeta's gesture was wonderful!" Octavia was practically bouncing in her seat. "It was superb! I can't wait to see the recap later."

Cinna walked to the end of the train car, where Portia was standing and whispered, "Think they'll play that in the recap later?"

Portia shook her head and whispered, "Not in a million years."



Their prep teams were rattling on and on about how inspiring Katniss and Peeta's speeches were and how wonderful they looked. They had done a remarkable job preparing them for their appearance. No one even heard the train doors open and the group of people entering until Haymitch bellowed that he needed a drink.

"Katniss, you were amazing!" Octavia ran to her along with the rest of her prep team.

"Peeta, we were in tears when you spoke," Camellia went to his side as he walked in.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

Effie followed Haymitch to the bar area where he picked up a bottle of wine and asked her with his eyes if that's what she wanted, she shook her head. He lifted up his bottle of whiskey and she nodded in agreement. They both drank their first glass without saying a word.

Cinna walked to Haymitch's side and said, "That went...well."

Haymitch looked at the prep teams, who were still being overly boisterous and fawning over their victors, and said quietly to the stylists, "You don't know the half of it."

"Shut up! Just shut up already!" They all turned when they heard Katniss scream. She looked around the room and said sheepishly, "I...I'm sorry...sorry." She ran down the corridor towards her quarters leaving everyone silently questioning her outburst.

Peeta took it upon himself to answer. "The sun on stage was ridiculously blinding. Katniss got a really bad headache from it. She was complaining about how dizzy she was by the time we got off the stage." That was enough to have both prep teams feeling sorry for the

female victor. They all offered Peeta various colored pills to bring to her. He accepted one of them and followed Katniss, pocketing the pill. Thinking about the day's events.

There was so much to tell his team, but Haymitch couldn't risk it on the train, especially with the abundance of Capitol staff roaming around. He needed to talk to them, but he'd have to do it one on one and have them spread the message. The first person on his list was Effie. He needed to find out what was going on back at the Justice Building. There had been two other shots after the first one rang out, then he and the kids disappeared. Haymitch needed to know what the mood was like amongst the officials back at the Justice Building. "Effie, what say you and me talk about tonight's activities?"

"Yes...I..." She was still shaken up. "I...need my schedule." She was looking around the room for her clipboard. Haymitch tapped the item tucked under her arm. "Oh. I don't know where my head is."

"Come on. I need to clean up a bit. That armored car..." he gave Cinna and Portia a look, nodding when Portia mouthed, 'armored car?' "...they made us ride in, was a bit dusty."

Haymitch took Effie into his quarters and she began rattling off their evening's schedule. "We have the dinner this evening, which will start at promptly at 6:00. Followed by dancing at 7:30 and we'll be back on the train by 10:00."

"No cocktail hour?" Haymitch asked sarcastically.

"Unfortunately, not in this district," Effie sounded truly disappointed. She followed Haymitch when he motioned for her to do so into his private bathroom.

Haymitch turned his bathroom faucet on full blast and whispered into Effie's ear. "I need you to do some snooping for me." She nodded. "Can we get into that Justice Building early?"

Neither Haymitch or Effie could put thoughts of the day out of their minds.

*"We're going!" Peeta screamed at the Peacekeepers that were lining up in front of the door to the Justice Building, blocking his and Katniss' view of the events. They were shoving a shocked Katniss backwards. "Back off!" he yelled when one of them got too close to her. "We get it, all right?" Peeta put his arm protectively around her and guided her back inside. "Come on, Katniss."*

*Katniss couldn't believe the way Peeta was speaking to the Peacekeepers. Everyone knew you didn't talk back to them, but Peeta looked like he was going to kill them with his bare hands if they got any closer to her. "Peeta?" Katniss glanced at him as they walked towards a waiting Effie and Haymitch.*

*They were standing under a television screen to the side of the open doors. "What happened?" Effie rushed to them. "We lost the television feed right after Katniss' beautiful speech, and then Haymitch said he thought he heard a gun fire, and I said it was ridiculous, but who knows? There are lunatics everywhere!" Effie's voice was shaking. She didn't let on that she and Haymitch had a perfect view of the events.*

*"Nothing happened, Effie," Peeta lied effortlessly. "A truck backfired. That's all."*

*All of their eyes met, showing fear when two more shots rang out from behind the closed doors.*

*"All of you. With me," Haymitch motioned to the group of them. They followed him and quickly walked through the old building. It was time to bring everyone up to speed. None of his team could be in the dark about Snow's visits any longer. Innocent people were dying. He didn't blame Katniss or Peeta, but they needed to be extra careful in the remaining districts and Effie had to keep an ear out with the officials. She was the only one that could get close enough to them. Haymitch led them up a maze of twisting staircases and narrow halls until he got to a trapdoor and pulled down a ladder. "Up!" He gripped Effie's feet, one by one and ripped off her shoes so she could climb with ease and shoved them in his jacket pocket.*

*"What are we doing in here?" Katniss knew she was going to have to come clean about President Snow, but she had no clue why she was doing it in front of Effie.*

*"What's happening?" Effie asked in a hushed voice.*

*Peeta looked at Haymitch then Effie and back at Haymitch again, who gave him a curt nod. That was all he needed to know. Effie had been brought into the rebellion. Somehow he had always known his escort would join them, but he hoped for her own safety, that she could just continue to live her carefree life in the Capitol. "Who goes first?" Peeta asked.*

*"Katniss," Haymitch snapped. "Tell them."*

*Katniss took a deep breath and said, "President Snow came to visit me before we left for the tour." She told Effie and Peeta what Snow had said and what she was supposed to do. "But I never intended for anything like this to happen. I was just trying to say thank you to the people of Eleven...to Thresh and Rue's families. Not start a rebellion or anything."*

*"Talk, Peeta," Haymitch gave him a look that said, but not too much.*

*"Snow came to see me too," he confessed. "He made me an...offer. Told me not to make any compassionate gestures during the tour and if I behaved..." he turned to Katniss. "...you and I could avoid going back to the Capitol. We'd never have to be mentors...he'd keep Prim's name out of the reaping...pretty much ignore both of our families in the future."*

*"Dear God," Effie exclaimed.*

*"What?" Katniss could barely breathe.*

*"That's why he came to see you, Katniss. That's why he told you what he did. To make sure I would do what he wanted." Peeta was sure she was going to hate him. "Katniss I'm sorry...I don't know what came over me...I saw Rue's family...her baby sister and I...I just couldn't act like...like they didn't mean anything to me."*

*"Why didn't you tell me?" Katniss' mouth had grown unnaturally dry. "I made things so much worse. I was supposed to fix things on this tour. Calm things down and all I've done is get people killed." She felt dizzy. She reached out a hand to steady herself and Effie put her arm around her waist.*

*"No. No. It was me. It was my fault," Peeta immediately took the blame. "I was the one that was supposed to keep things calm. Not you."*

*"He didn't tell you to keep things calm," Katniss started to raise her voice. "He said that to me."*

*"He insinuated it to me!" Peeta needed her to understand that he was the one that caused the problems out there.*

*"Enough!" Effie put a halt to their argument before it got out of hand. "President Snow would have found an excuse...any excuse to go back on what he told both of you." She turned to Peeta and said, "There is no way on God's green earth that he would've allowed you two to live your lives out of the Capitol's grasp. You're much too valuable to him. Not having the only pair of victors at the Quarter Quell their first year as mentors would be like admitting you two had pulled one over on him. Trust me when I say that not only will you two be at those Games, you will be the stars of them." She faced Katniss and said, "And you...did you honestly believe he was thinking of you when he ordered you to resume your romance? That man cares for himself and himself alone. He has been playing the two of you against one another since you left the arena and you've both allowed him to." She pointed an accusing finger at Haymitch and said, "And you've let him! You're supposed to be their mentor! What is wrong with you? And Peeta...asking you not to be who you are is simply preposterous. That's like asking the sun not to shine and Snow knows it. So both of you stop blaming yourselves because that's exactly what he wants. Now there will be no more secrets do you hear me? None!" Katniss was suddenly grateful their escort had joined them in the tiny room. "Secrets are a good way to get the people you trust...the people you love killed. Now is there anything else we need to get out in the open?" Effie looked back and forth between Haymitch and Peeta. "Perhaps something about the first arena?"*

*Peeta closed his eyes as Katniss asked, "What about the first arena?" She glared at Haymitch. "What did you do?"*

*"It's not what he did. It's what I did," Peeta told her. "I refused to accept sponsor gifts." If they were going to let it all out, Peeta was going to tell Katniss everything about the first arena before she found out from someone else.*

*"You did what?" Katniss was furious. "You stupid fool! Why would you do such a thing?"*

*"To save your life, sweetheart. The boy wasn't planning on leaving the arena anyway, so what was the point?"*

*"I knew Peeta wanted me to live, but...did you choose me too, Haymitch?" Katniss squinted her eyes at her mentor.*

*"Yeah."*

*"Why? You like him better than me."*

*"That's true, but until they changed the rules I could only get one of you out of there alive and since he was determined to protect you I thought maybe I could bring you home," Haymitch answered defensively.*

*"Is there anything else the two of you are keeping from me?" Katniss glower flew between Haymitch and Peeta.*

*Peeta looked intently at Haymitch and waited for the man to answer, hoping that he would tell her the truth. "No," his mentor answered.*

*Effie pursed her lips and said, "Are you sure there's nothing else? Nothing at all?"*

*"I'm sure, Effie." Haymitch said with authority.*

*"Then I suggest we leave here before they find us in a compromising situation." She made a motion with her arm for the door and said, "It goes without saying that none of us saw what happened to that man today." Peeta and Katniss' eyes flew to Effie's. "Do I make myself clear?" They both nodded. "Good. Let's go."*

Peeta fumbled with the little pink pill he got from one of the members of his prep team for the headache he told them Katniss had as he stood outside of her bedroom door. He didn't know if he should knock or not. If he did chances were she wouldn't answer so he just turned the handle and walked inside to find an empty room. "This is getting to be a habit," he said to himself. He closed the door and walked down the hall towards his room and opened the door, but she wasn't there either. 'Where are you?' He asked himself.

He walked through each train car and found her standing in front of his painting of their date. "Katniss." She turned to him. "I want you to know...I didn't make that offer to their families because Snow told me not to do anything compassionate."

"And I didn't come back to you because Snow told me to."

They walked into each other's arms and held on.

"No more secrets, Peeta," Katniss whispered in his ear.

He took a deep breath and whispered back, "I still have one."

Katniss pulled away from him and said, "Tell me."

"I can't," he said quietly. He pulled her ear to his lips. "Too many lives depend on it. I just need you to trust me." He whispered, "Can you do that? Can you trust me?"

She pulled away from him and searched his eyes with hers. "Yes." If Peeta was still keeping a secret from her after all that had happened she knew it had to be serious so she didn't push him. She trusted him enough to know that he'd tell her in time. "I trust you, Peeta."

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Gale stood in the middle of Town Square with everyone from his district watching the Victory Tour. He had been catching the recaps at night after working at the mines, but today was Sunday so he had decided to start his hunting day earlier than normal and since he had to do some trading in town, he might as well watch the tour on the big screen. Gale had noticed something about Katniss and Peeta's actions while on tour. Their first few interactions had seemed genuine. Gale was convinced Katniss had taken Peeta back on her own terms and not because Peeta had somehow seduced her into it. Then he watched the recap of their appearance in District Eleven and something seemed...off. The whole event looked as though it were staged. Katniss had said they were supposed to say a few personal words to the families of the dead tributes after they recited the speech from the Capitol, but neither she nor Peeta did. The scene jumped from the speech the Capitol had provided for them to the mayor handing them a plaque then the formal dinner and dance. It was choppy and Gale could sense the tension between Katniss and Peeta. Since their appearance there, they had been portraying the perfect pair of lovey dovey victors. The only problem was that they weren't fooling Gale. Sure, they were fooling everyone else, but Gale had seen them in their natural habitat. He had seen them when they weren't hiding their emotions and what they were doing for the cameras was almost forced. There were glimpses of the real thing here and there, but there was always an underlying tension that Gale wondered about. Tonight they were in District Eight. Gale wondered how Peeta was going to handle that considering he kept apologizing to the girl he killed from there before he slit her throat. For some reason tonight's feed was live. Gale was looking forward to seeing what was actually happening on the tour instead of what the Capitol portrayed to the districts.

The television screen was showing scenes from Katniss and Peeta's tour thus far. Them receiving plaques and flowers, dining on gourmet foods, dancing in spacious rooms and their constant public displays of affection for one another. Hand holding, hugs, kisses, but those weren't the things that seemed genuine to Gale. It was the little touches...the brushes of their hands against a back...an arm...Katniss automatically reaching for Peeta's hand whenever a Peacekeeper would get too close to them or Peeta wrapping his arm protectively around her when the Peacekeepers would walk them to their destination as though he was guarding her from them. Between those and the glances they'd exchange, Gale had no doubt that Katniss and Peeta were defying the Capitol once again and they weren't planning on staying apart when they returned home.

The mayor from District Eight introduced Katniss and Peeta to the stage and the crowd on screen went unnaturally wild. They were cheering Katniss' name as though she were from their district and pushing towards the stage, against the Peacekeepers, who were trying their best to keep them away from Katniss and Peeta.

"Thank you. Thank you," Peeta had a curious look on his face. "Please," he made a motion with his hand to try and silence the crowd, but it just seemed to encourage them. "Please." Gale couldn't believe how the crowd from District Eight was behaving considering Peeta had killed one of their own.

The mayor took the microphone and said, "Let's quiet down. Quiet down." He was obviously giving an order, but trying to be polite for the cameras. No one was paying attention.

Katniss turned to Peeta and said, "What do we do?" Peeta shrugged his shoulders. "Should we just read our speeches?" The moment she

started to speak Gale couldn't help but notice how the whole crowd instantly silenced.

Peeta stared at Katniss for what seemed like an eternity then said, "Go ahead, Katniss."

"Um..." she cleared her throat.

Peeta took some note cards out of his hand and gave them to her. "Read mine."

"Okay," she took his cards, looked down and began to read. "Thank you to the people of District Eight for welcoming us. As victors of the Hunger Games we..." she squinted and looked up at Peeta who gave her a squeeze. "...we are sorry for the loss of your tributes and hope you can forgive us," she looked up at Peeta. "We did what we had to do to make it out of the Games alive." The District Eight crowd went crazy. They were cheering and chanting out Katniss' name. This speech wasn't like any of the others Gale had heard in the recaps from the visits to the other districts. "We're so proud to have the opportunity to come here and show our gratitude for your sacrifice." Katniss addressed the dead tribute's families. "We are sorry for your loss."

Peeta looked at both families and said, "I'm so sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

The crowd began pushing forward again and Peeta put his arm around Katniss. "Peeta?" She turned to him with concern in her eyes.

"It's okay, Katniss. They're just excited." 'No they're not,' Gale thought to himself. 'They're going to hurt her. Get her out of there, Peeta.' Then Gale saw a Peacekeeper trampled by the crowd and the live feed was cut.

"What the hell?" Gale yelled out.

Someone standing next to him asked, "Did they charge the stage?"

"I don't know. It looked like it," Gale was petrified. He listened as the people around him murmured their questions and concerns until the television screen flashed back on and showed Katniss and Peeta walking hand and hand across the train platform with Haymitch and Effie Trinket, no worse for wear. "Thank, God." Gale let out a sigh of relief.

"Maybe Peeta was right and the crowd was just over excited or something?" The guy next to him said.

"Yeah...maybe." Gale hoped, but something inside of him told him there was more to it than that.

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"Miss. Trinket?" An attendant cautiously entered the dining car. "You have an urgent message. If you'll follow me please?"

Effie looked around the table and let her eyes land on Haymitch's. "Well, I wonder what's broken down now?" She stood up and threw her napkin on her chair in a huff, hoping to appear more annoyed than worried. She followed the attendant to the train platform where there was a group of Peacekeepers surrounding the mayor from District Ten. "Mr. Mayor," Effie exclaimed. "What an honor to see you."

"Miss. Trinket." He shook her hand. "I apologize for interrupting you, but this came for you from the Capitol and I was ordered to hand it directly to you." He placed an envelope in her hand.

"More instructions for the tour, I'm sure. An escort's job is never done."  
She was doing her very best to hide the tremor in her voice.

"I'm sure that's all it is," the mayor shook her hand again. "I must get back. There's still so much to do to prepare for the festivities."

"Of course." Effie smiled and tucked the envelope under her arm.  
"We'll be seeing you later then."

"Yes..." he glanced at the envelope and stepped back. "I'm looking forward to it."

"As are we." Effie stepped inside of the train and watched through the window as the mayor was escorted by his guards away from the train. She walked to her quarters and opened the envelope and read the contents of the package. "Haymitch!" She jumped up and bustled towards the dining car. "Haymitch!"

"What?" He was still sitting at the table surrounded by everyone else.

"We..." Effie glanced at the group of curious onlookers. "There's been a change in tonight's events. I need to see you and our victors immediately."

"I'm eating," Katniss complained.

"Katniss, quit whining," Peeta told her.

"I'm not whining. I'm hungry." She scowled at him.

"I'm sure Effie wouldn't mind if you brought your plate with you, would you Effie?" Peeta looked to his escort for confirmation.

"No...no...of course not," Effie shook her head. "Bring it...that's fine."  
Effie turned and hurried down the hall.

Haymitch stood up and said, "Come on," to Katniss and Peeta. "Leave the plate," he ordered Katniss. Who rolled her eyes at him and brought her lunch with her anyway.

Peeta grinned and followed everyone to Effie's quarters, closing the door behind him. "What's going on, Effie?"

"This." She handed the envelope to Haymitch.

"Shit!" Haymitch ran his hand down his face. "Well, we knew they'd do something. I just didn't think they'd start so quick."

"Who'd do what?" Katniss asked.

"Here," Haymitch handed the letter to Peeta who held it so he and Katniss could read it together.

Orders From the Capitol:

In light of Miss. Everdeen and Mr. Mellark's recent speeches in District Eleven, the officials in the Capitol feel that it is in the best interest of all involved for the victors to address the remaining districts with strictly Capitol approved discourse. Enclosed you will find speeches that will not entice disturbances, which we are sure were unknowingly caused by the victors during their visit to District Eleven. Please follow the schedule we have enclosed and do not make any unnecessary stops. Do not leave the train unless approved by officials beforehand. Do not attempt to tour any official or unofficial buildings unless approved by the Capitol beforehand. And under no circumstances are Miss Everdeen and Mr. Mellark allowed to be left unattended in any district, other than Twelve, without Peacekeepers to protect them from harm. We would hate for anything to happen to them prior to their arrival to the Capitol.

Peeta took hold of the lunch plate that was slipping out of Katniss' fingers. "Why don't they just come right out and tell us, we got those people killed?" He asked.

"You didn't do a damn thing," Haymitch pointed at him. "They pulled the trigger, not you."

"They're threatening us though." Katniss' had a trembling in her chest.

"Not in so many words..." Effie said softly. "But...I think we can still pull this off."

"How?" Katniss yelled at her. "How the hell are we supposed to do that, Effie?"

"By playing up the Star Crossed Lovers angle," she tried to keep herself and Katniss calm. "If you and Peeta just stick to their speeches and stay as close as possible in front of these cameras. Show them that you only have eyes for one another...they'll see that you don't care what happens in the districts. All you care about is one another and what happened in Eleven was simply...an unfortunate event."

"An unfortunate event?" Katniss sat on one of the sofas. "Yeah...that's what it was."

"Effie's got a point, sweetheart." Haymitch walked towards her. "Everybody knows that you had a bond with Rue in the arena and Thresh saved your life...hell he saved both your lives. You two wouldn't be here without either one of those kids. It's only natural that you two would show extra compassion towards their families."

"Yes," Effie sat next to Katniss and finished her earlier thought. "It's not your fault the people of District Eleven are barbarians who can't..."

"Barbarians?" Katniss glared at Effie.

"Katniss," Peeta knelt in front of her and took her hands in his. "I think I get what Effie is saying." He glanced at his escort. "They can't help their upbringing," his eyes urged her to understand. "As much as we couldn't help ours. They couldn't help the fact that they reacted to our simple gesture with such a...a..."

"Peasant like manner," Effie finished for him with sorrow in her eyes. She placed a hand on Katniss' leg and begged her with her expression to forgive her crude words.

Katniss looked around the room at the three people that were trying to save her...all of their lives. She sighed as she finally got their meaning. "Yes...they did seem a bit backwards." It killed her to say that out loud, but someone might be listening. "It's a good thing we have no real ties to any other districts." Katniss squeezed Peeta's hands in hers, knowing that District Eight and Five were going to be exceptionally painful for him. "Now all we have to do is enjoy the rest of the tour."

"And then we can go home and enjoy being with each other." He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss against it.

Suddenly a thought hit Katniss. Her eyes grew huge with fear. 'What if Snow decided not to let us enjoy being with each other?' She tugged Peeta's hand and shook her head. She leaned into him and whispered in his ear. "He won't let us. He'll insist that we stay apart again."

Peeta pulled away from her and looked at Haymitch who had a look on his face as if he already knew what they were thinking. "Yeah..." he sighed quietly.



Katniss' mind was racing. 'There has to be a way for me and Peeta to stay together. A way that Snow can't keep us apart. But how? How? We could keep sneaking around, but he's got cameras everywhere. God, this would be so much easier if we were married.' Her eyebrows shot up and she jumped to her feet. She pulled all of them into a huddle and began to whisper. "I know what to do. It can solve all of our problems."

"What?" Effie urged her on.

"You can ask me to marry you, Peeta." Katniss gave him a look like she was asking him for nothing more significant than to get her a glass of water. "When we're doing our interview at the Capitol, you can propose to me."

Haymitch glanced at Peeta who had a blank expression on his face. "That would take care of you two not being able to spend time together back in Twelve."

"And it would put a lot of minds at ease in the Capitol," Effie added.

"What do you think?" Katniss looked at Peeta expecting him to be thrilled with the idea.

"Yeah...sure, Katniss. I'll propose to you," he said flatly.

"Well what's wrong?" She asked him. "Don't you want to marry me?"

Peeta gave Effie and Haymitch a look and said, "If you'll excuse us." He took Katniss by the hand and said, "We need to take a walk."

He took her to the end car where they could step outside and their words could be drowned out by the sound of the rumbling of the train's engines and the wheels on the track.

"I don't understand. I thought you loved me," she said in an accusing manor.

"Oh, I love you all right. I love you more than anything, but I don't want..." he lowered his voice down. "...Snow dictating our future together."

"He's not. I thought you wanted to marry me," she sounded wounded.

"I do, Katniss. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you, but you don't want to get married." He stood before her and stared her down. "Tell me I'm wrong. See...I know you love me. I know you do, but I also know that you do not want marriage right now, but I'll propose to you. I will." He held a finger under her chin and said, "Just do me a favor...let me know when you change your mind."

"What do you mean? Change my mind?"

"I mean..." He placed his hands on her upper arms and said to her. "I'm doing the proposing this time, but when you want to get married...I mean really want to marry me...you're going to have to do the asking." He left her standing there to think about what he said.

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"There's a delivery here for you, Peeta," Portia handed him a small crate.

"A delivery?" Peeta hadn't ordered anything and why would he be getting something while they were on the Victory Tour?

"Looks like some painting supplies," Portia gave him a little grin.

Peeta's eyes flickered to hers. "Where do you think I should open it?"  
'Is there any place on this train that's safe?' He asked himself.

"Well if you don't want everyone to see what you've got...in case it's a present for Katniss," Flavius added. "I'd open it in the last car. You know...where you can push the buttons and the windows retract?"

Peeta lifted the corner of his lips in a little grin and said. "Excellent idea."

"It's really the only place a person can get any form of privacy around here. No one knows you're there when the windows are open," Flavius whispered to him.

Portia and Flavius stood together and watched as Peeta took his package and headed to the back of the train. Peeta had found out shortly after returning to Twelve that one of Katniss' prep team members was part of the rebellion. Since he was related to someone of importance in the Capitol, his involvement with the rebels was kept under wraps and only the team from District Twelve knew about it. Peeta hadn't known which member of the prep team it was until the Victory Tour when Portia introduced him to Flavius. He was the last person anyone would suspect to be part of the rebellion and blended in with the Capitol crowd all too well with his corkscrew orange curls and dark purple lipstick, but he had a fierce loyalty towards Katniss which Peeta respected. It turned out that Flavius cousin was married to a Capitol official and she loved to gossip, as all residents of the Capitol do. One night after a little too much to drink, Flavius mentioned how thrilled he was to be going on the Victory Tour and his cousin said she couldn't stand the thought of everyone watching her every move. When Flavius inquired about her comment she let it slip that not only were there recording devices on the train, but cameras in most of the rooms as well. Not all of them, but most of them. The only one she

was certain didn't have the capabilities of continuous functioning surveillance was the last train car. When the button was pushed so the windows retracted into the ceiling all of the Capitol devices cease to work in that room. They had been trying to fix it for years, but no one could figure out how.

Peeta stopped by the train car that held his artwork and gathered up the supplies he needed. He had only brought his paints on the off chance that he couldn't sleep. Now he was grateful that he thought ahead. He went into the last train compartment and pressed the button, popped open the tiny crate to find several small canvases and felt the edge of each one. When he discovered the one that held the secret message he prayed that it was in a language he could read without a cipher for there would be no writing down any messages while on the Victory Tour. He walked to the corner of the compartment, out of view of peeking eyes, and took out the chemicals he needed, quickly mixing them together. He took the blue paintbrush that came with the supplies and dipped it in the liquid and brushed it in the upper left hand corner of the canvas then blew against it. This message was longer than normal so he had to quickly add more liquid to it and he blew on it again. He read the words, fortunately it was something he could understand, and couldn't believe what he was reading. The rebellion had rigged it so there would be something wrong with the broadcasting equipment and the speeches in Eight were not going to be shown via recap but rather would be broadcast live. They had also intercepted the speeches for District Eight and Peeta wasn't to speak, but he was able to add his own personal apology if he wanted. The crowd would be responding to Katniss. Peeta closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This was the rebellion's big move. Their test. Not only to see if they could wage an uprising against the Capitol, but a test for him and his loyalty to the rebellion. Would he be willing to let Katniss take her position next to him as a face of the rebellion? Would he allow her to unknowingly have people follow her into a war? They

weren't asking him to step away from the main stage, they just wanted to see how committed he was to their fight. He knew it. The fact was, the rebellion needed both of them. He was sure they needed Katniss more; she was the one that acted on her instincts. He was the one that thought things through first. She was the one that had been showing up the Capitol from the moment she volunteered for her sister...that was willing to kill everyone that stood in her path. He was the one that was willing to die for her, but she was a wreck without him and he was one without her. The rebellion's question was would he be willing to let Katniss risk her life for her country? How could he do it? How could he let her pull the focus onto herself without her even knowing what she was doing? He needed to talk to Haymitch, but he knew what the man would say. He could hear his mentor's words without even speaking to him. *"The girl's got guts, kid. She can do this. All you've got to do is stand by her side and support her."* Once again, Peeta was being put on the spot. Having to make a decision that would change the course of everyone's life. He took the chemicals he mixed and threw them out the moving train, then began mixing up some paints and spreading them on the canvas. He didn't know what he was painting. He just started to mix colors and spread them across the canvas. He lost track of time. His focus was no longer on the rebellion or his upcoming proposal, but on the portrait he was painting.

"There you are," Effie's voice brought him out of his trance. "Oh my word," she gasped. "Peeta." Effie walked up to him and took the paintbrush from his hand. She studied the picture then turned to him. "I have wanted to tell you this since you were in the arena," she took a deep breath and looked him in the eyes. "I would be proud to call you my son."

Peeta gave his escort a curious look and said, "Thanks, Effie." He accepted her hug and glanced at the picture he was painting. Though

it wasn't complete it was obvious what it was that he had been painting. Himself at the age of eleven with a black eye. He gripped Effie's back and felt her arms tighten around him. "I don't know what to do, Effie."

"About what?" She whispered in his ear.

"Effie," he whispered back. "How much has Haymitch told you?" Peeta knew there was no surveillance in the room, but that didn't mean there weren't people walking around the train listening into their conversation.

"Enough. The question is, how much are you keeping from Katniss?"

"Too much, Effie. Too much." Months of stress came out in silent tears against his escort's shoulder. For the first time in Peeta's life he felt like he actually had a mother. Someone that cared about him and his feelings, not what he could do for his country, but what was happening in his life. "Effie, can I tell you something without you telling, Haymitch?"

"Peeta," she whispered. "I thought we agreed on no secrets."

"Please, Effie?" He begged her.

"You tell me, and if I think we need to keep it between us, then I'll keep it to myself." She pulled back and looked him in his teary eyes. "How's that?"

"Okay." He leaned in and whispered what the rebellion was planning on doing in District Eight and what they wanted him to do...what they wanted Katniss to do. "So you see, Effie? See why I can't tell him? He'll force me into it and I need to make this decision on my own."

"Yes. Too many people are making choices for you both," she agreed. "I won't presume to tell you what to do, but I will give you some advice. Think of Katniss. What would she want you to do? If she were privy to all the information, which I think she should be..." Effie gave him a disconcerting look. "...what actions would she take?" Effie rubbed the center of his back and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Now, don't rush to judgment. This deserves some thought." Effie paused then brought them back to reality. "You need to get together with your prep team. They're looking for you. We're due on the platform in two hours and you're covered in paint." Effie looked down at herself and said, "Now I am too." Normally she'd be upset, but she just grinned at him. "I didn't really like this outfit anyway."

Peeta smiled at her and said, "Effie, I'd be proud to be your son any day of the week." He watched her flutter her false green lashes as she walked ahead of him and down the corridor.

'What would Katniss do?' Peeta kept thinking that to himself over and over again as they stood on the stage in District Eight. The crowd was going crazy, like they were supposed to. They were pressing forward and he tried to calm them down, but they just kept making noise. 'What would Katniss do?'

Then he remembered their conversation in his head the night before they got to District Eleven.

*"If you had a chance to change things...knowing it would put everyone you love in jeopardy... but really change things...would you do it?"*  
*Peeta asked her.*

*It had taken her a minute to answer but when she did, she had conviction in her eyes and Katniss said, "Yes. I would."*

Peeta took the speech the rebellion had provided them and handed it to Katniss. He was willing to do what all of these people in this district...in this country were willing to do. To stand by her side and fight with her. He would tell her about the rebellion when they got home whether Haymitch liked it or not. Once she saw how oppressed all of the districts were while they were on the tour, she'd want to do everything in her power to help the rebellion, he was sure of it. Katniss had always had a soft spot for people in need. He watched her as she gave him a curious look while reading the speech, it was the polar opposite of all the others the Capitol had provided and he gave her a reassuring hug when she needed it. At the end of it, he needed to tell the family of the girl he killed how sorry he was, but the truth was he didn't know which family was hers so he addressed both of them. Then all hell broke loose and the uprising began.

Peeta lifted Katniss into his arms and ran off of the stage, Peacekeepers made a path for them and ushered them into their armored car with Haymitch and Effie. They were rushed back to the platform and were told to walk normally back to the train regardless of the noises that were coming from the district. The camera crew recorded them, not once, but twice. The first time they made their trek to the train they practically ran. The director told them to do it again only this time they were to hold hands and look lovingly into each other's eyes.

"We can do this, Katniss. The sooner we get this done. The sooner we leave this district." Peeta placed a kiss on her lips and said, "One more time for the cameras." He gave Effie a wink and said, "Let's get this show on the road team." They all strolled nonchalantly to the train as though it were a leisurely Sunday afternoon. None of them knew that they made it out of District Eight only five minutes before a hovercraft arrived delivering several hundred Peacekeepers to the district.



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"What do you think of the tour so far, mom?" Prim was rocking back and forth in one of their matching rockers and petting her cat, Buttercup.

"It's been...different than most."

"That's what I think too," Prim looked at her mother who was grind something with her mortar and pestle. "Peeta doesn't really sound like himself, does he?"

"He's probably just nervous being in front of all of those people," her mother made an excuse.

"Mom, Peeta told the entire nation he was in love with Katniss...you really think he's going to be nervous in the districts?" Prim gave her a twisted grin. "I don't think he's reading his own speeches."

"What makes you say that, Prim?"

"For starters, he read me some of them before he left and I haven't heard any of them on television at all." Buttercup jumped out of her lap and Prim brushed the cat's fur off of her dress.

"Maybe they're doing things differently because they are two victors this year. You know...to save time."

"Maybe," Prim shrugged. "Or maybe they're afraid Katniss is going to start more trouble like she did with those berries." Prim walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"Prim!" Her mother scolded.

"What?"

"Why on earth would you say something like that?"

"Mom, I'm not an idiot, you know?" Prim got her water and walked back into the living room and sat down on the rocker to wait for Katniss and Peeta to be on TV. "I know that Katniss and Peeta were in trouble for the nightlock."

"I'm sure you're wrong, Primrose. If they were in trouble then wouldn't they have been punished? Put in jail or...or..."

"Or?" Prim looked at her mother. "Mom, they're going to be fine. They're doing what they're supposed to. They're playing nice on TV. Everybody loves them and pretty soon they'll come home and we can protect them again." Prim walked up to her mom and hugged her. "Don't worry mom. We'll have them back soon enough and then they'll be safe. We won't let anybody hurt them."

Her mother held onto her and said, "No we won't. We'll take good care of them...both."

Prim smiled against her mother's ear and said, "You like Peeta don't you?"

"Yes I do."

"I love him," Prim giggled. "I hope Katniss marries him one day so he can be my brother for real."

"She's too young to get married." Her mother gave her a playful swat on the behind.

"But if she married him...nothing could keep them apart, mom and she'd always be safe. Peeta would always protect her." Prim grinned

at her mom and sat down to watch as the Capitol's seal appeared on the television screen and the mayor of District One walked out onto the stage.

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Katniss' nightmares grew progressively worse the closer they got to the Capitol. Each district held its own special torture. There were some that she and Peeta hadn't personally affected, but there were others, like Eight, Five, Four, Two and One that were pure hell. Looking into the families' faces and reading off the speeches the Capitol sent to them seemed heartless with the exception of District Eight. That one felt like Peeta had written it himself, but it had the Capitol's seal on it like the others so Katniss knew it was official. She had learned the name of the boy that had killed Rue in District One, Marvel. She wanted to forget his name, but she knew she never would. That night she crawled under the covers in her room and waited for Peeta to come to her, but he never did. She stared up at her ceiling wondering where he was and when she could no longer take it she went on a search for him. She found him in the last train car painting.

"Peeta?"

"Hey," he turned to her. "What time is it?" She was wearing a nightshirt, robe and slippers.

"It's after twelve." Katniss walked over to the picture he was painting and closed her eyes. "Oh, Peeta. Why are you painting that?"

"I started it while we were in District Eight and I wanted to finish it before we got to the Capitol." He set his paintbrush down. "It's pretty much done now. I was just putting on some finishing touches."

Out of all of the pictures he had painted...and he had painted some gruesome portraits of the Games, she hated this one the most. "I can't stand seeing you like that. With that bruise." She turned her back to it.

Peeta smiled at her and said, "I'm going to give it to my mother when I get home."

Katniss eyes flew to his and said, "You are not! Are you?" She bit her lip to hide her smile.

"Yup." He wiped his hands on a rag. "I'm evil, aren't I?" He gave her a wicked grin.

"Yes," she couldn't help but smile.

"Hey, you must be tired. Want to go to bed?" He tossed the rag down on the floor and put his used paintbrushes in a jar that held cleaning solution in it.

"I was in bed...you weren't." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh, well..." he pulled her into his arms. "How about I make it up to you?"

"Sounds good. What did you have in mind?"

He looked around the room and said, "Feel like camping out?"

"In here?" She took notice of her surroundings. Peeta had the windows retracted so the night air was blowing gently through the

train. The stars were twinkling and the moon was so bright it illuminated the entire train car. "Where would we sleep? On the sofa?"

"We could bring in some pillows and a few blankets...how about the floor?"

"Why do you want to sleep in here?" Katniss asked him.

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss against her lips. "I found out there's no surveillance in here when the windows are open."

"Really?" Katniss' eyes lit up.

"Mmmm hmmm," he nodded.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Katniss made multiple trips back and forth between their private quarters the last train compartment while Peeta cleaned himself up and changed into his pajamas. She padded the floor with several blankets from both of their beds and asked an attendant for a few extra quilts. When she was done they had a nice little makeshift bed under the stars.

Peeta held her in his arms and said, "This is the first time in a long time I actually feel like I can relax."

"Me too," she sighed. "How long have you known about this room?"

"Not long. I should've suggested this as soon as I found out though." He felt like an idiot for not thinking of it sooner.

"Let's sleep in here on the way home too." Katniss curled herself into his chest.

"Katniss?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think..." He couldn't believe he was nervous. He had done this a million times. "Um...do you think I could kiss you?"

"Of course you can. Why are you asking?" She leaned up to look at him.

"Because...this is the first time no one will be watching us."

The reality of the situation hit her. "Oh." She could feel the nerves hit her in the stomach like someone had punched her. She sat upright and let the blanket fall to her waist. She immediately pulled it up to her chin.

Peeta sat up and said, "I don't have to if you don't want me to."

"No...no. I mean...we've kissed each other a bunch of times and we thought no one was watching." 'But we've never been in our pajamas and lying down before,' she thought to herself.

"So it's okay?" He asked her timidly.

She nodded and gave him a shy smile.

He kept his hands on the floor by his sides and leaned in before placing a soft peck against her lips. He saw her lashes flutter close as he kissed her again and felt her fists tighten their grip on the blanket. His heart fluttered at her timidity. They had shared multiple kisses, had many intimate moments, but there was always something...someone watching...listening or they were in a public place like the woods. Though it was secluded, it was still outdoors and anyone could walk up to them, like Gale had. Tonight though...tonight they both knew that

no one was watching. No one could hear them. Tonight they could finally share their first real kiss without prying eyes. With nothing in between them but the blanket that Katniss was clutching to her chest.

Katniss slowly released the blanket and let her fingers crawl up Peeta's arms. The muscle he had lost in the arena had built back up. She wondered how she hadn't noticed this before. She suddenly became acutely aware of many things about him. The slight scent of paint on his skin. The smooth feeling of his face against hers. She wondered why he didn't grow facial hair. The way his hands seemed to know exactly where to move along her body without touching her anywhere intimately, yet making everything in her cry out for more. 'How did you learn to do these things, Peeta?' She wondered. She felt him scoot closer to her as his fingers tangled in her hair. She wore it down at night for him. He loved it that way.

Peeta lay down, gently pulling her with him and rolled them on to their sides, not wanting to end their kiss, but doing so just the same. He saw her smile. It was soft...sweet, something Katniss would argue she wasn't, but he knew better. "I love you, Katniss."

"I love you, Peeta." She placed a soft peck against his lips. There had been an underlying tension between them since she had suggested he propose to her, but it seemed to have dissipated tonight. Still she was curious. "Are you still mad at me?"

"I didn't know I was mad at you."

She ran her finger along the opening of his pajama shirt at his collar and said, "For making you propose to me."

"Oh," Peeta said, catching up to speed with her. "No. I'm not mad at you. I never was...I was...am...frustrated." He stroked a comforting hand down her back and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I've always

known I wanted to marry you...spend my life with you, but I hate that Snow is determining when and where I ask you to do that. I always thought I'd ask you when you were ready for it and Katniss..." He looked down into her eyes. "One day...you will be ready for it. I know you will. Granted..." he rested his cheek against her head and pulled her closer to him. "...we might be married already, but one day you'll stop and realize, hey...I want to be married to Peeta." He placed a soft kiss against her lips and said, "I only plan on proposing to you once in my life, Katniss and I know you're going to say yes. Just promise me when you come to that realization...no matter when it is...even if we've been married for a decade...you'll tell me...you'll ask me to marry you for real." He lifted the corners of his mouth in a soft and loving smile.

Katniss wanted desperately to tell him that he was wrong. That she did want to marry him, but the truth was she didn't want to get married. Marriage led to children and that was something she never wanted. So she did the only thing she could. "I promise, Peeta."

"Good." He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Peeta? What are we going to do about...kids?"

"I don't know," Peeta had been concerned about the very same thing.

"You can't even get birth control on the black market in the districts," Katniss was terrified she'd wind up pregnant with Peeta's baby and the offspring of two victors would definitely be in the arena.

"It makes me sick that people don't have the choice of whether or not to use it." The Capitol had been controlling even that aspect of people's lives.



"They need to make sure they have plenty of tributes for the Games," Katniss said with disgust.

"Oh, no, Katniss." Peeta said sarcastically. "They're only thinking of the country's population."

"Population my ass," she rolled her eyes.

"Do you think your mother might know how to prevent it?" Peeta asked. "I mean...she is a healer."

"She's a healer not a miracle worker...but...I guess I could ask her." Even the thought of talking to her mom made her blush.

"Or there's Effie...or Portia." Peeta suggested. "It's not illegal in the Capitol. I bet they could get their hands on some for us."

"Don't you dare ask them, Peeta." Now Katniss was really embarrassed. "They don't need to know our personal business."

"Katniss, they already assume we're..."

"I don't care what anyone assumes." She hid her face in his chest.

"Okay," he stroked her back. "I won't say a word, but...Katniss...isn't it better than the alternative?"

"They could get in a lot of trouble for doing something like that, Peeta. I couldn't ask them to risk being turned into an Avox just to get us some..." Katniss didn't know what was worse. Effie's tongue being cut out or the possibility of hers and Peeta's child being reaped. "What would we do if we had a baby? What would we do?"

"We'd raise it like a Career." Peeta told her firmly. "We'd teach it from the moment it was born how to fight, how to survive...just like its

mom." He saw Katniss' bottom lip start to quiver and decided to change the subject. "So...you are going to say yes when I propose to you on national television, right? I mean...you're not going to make me look like an idiot or anything are you?" He felt her body vibrating and heard her sad laughter.

"Nope. I'm going to turn you down flat." She looked up at him.

"Prim's going to be so excited." Peeta smiled.

"My mother's going to have a fit. She'll think we're too young."

"We are kind of young." Peeta twirled her hair in his hand.

"So we'll wait until we're eighteen to get married. That'll give us a couple of years to..."

"A year." Peeta interrupted. "That'll give me a year."

"What?" She asked.

"I'm seventeen."

"No you're not. We're the same age," she said to him as if he had no clue how old he was.

"I had a birthday."

"When?" How did she not know this bit of information?

"Three days before the tour started."

"Why...why didn't you say something? Why didn't you..." Katniss fingers were digging into his pajamas.

"You asked me to leave you alone." He could see the guilt flashing across her face.

Katniss felt horrible about not knowing his birthday had come and gone. "I didn't even get you a gift."

"Yes you did," he whispered. "You gave me you. What more could I ask for?" He felt her hand cradle his face and saw a flicker of pain in her eyes. "But if you want to get me something...I wouldn't say no to those swimming lessons." He got his desired response when he saw her smile.

"Seriously? You want to learn how to swim?"

"As long as you don't think my new leg will cause me to sink to the bottom," he chuckled.

"You got it. As soon as it's warm enough I'll take you to the lake and teach you." Katniss found that for the first time since her father was alive, she was actually looking forward to returning to the lake.

"It's strange isn't it? I know so much about you...I know you'd die for me...but...I don't know your birthday."

Katniss grinned at him and told him, "It's three weeks from today actually. So I'm expecting something wonderful...like a picture of our date in the cave." She placed a kiss against his jaw and yawned in the middle of it. "Sorry," she let out a little giggle.

"I guess we should go to sleep, huh?" He asked.

"No. I don't want to." They were lying on their sides, their legs entwined, their faces inches apart and their hands roaming up and

down the other's arms...back...shoulders... "I don't want to waste tonight."

"Me either." He was really hoping she'd say that.

"Peeta? Can you tell me what the other secret it now?" He hadn't brought it up since he whispered it to her after they left District Eleven. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

He thought about it for a moment. He knew he was going to be in the Capitol by morning and there would be a meeting with the rebellion. Haymitch would be bringing Effie into the group. Introducing her to everyone as the go between to get messages to Plutarch Heavensbee. Peeta was going to talk about Katniss' knowledge...or lack of knowledge about the rebellion and Effie had said she would support him during the meeting. She was going to get Cinna, Portia and Flavius to support him too, though he didn't think they'd need much convincing. Then there was President Snow to consider. Katniss might have to face him at the dinner he was throwing for them and if she had prior knowledge of the rebellion before seeing him she might let her nerves get the best of her or worse yet, she might get cocky and brazen...that would be much more like her. "I can't tell you yet, but I will. When we get back to Twelve. I'll tell you as much as I can without putting more people in danger. Can you still trust me?" He could see the doubt in her eyes when he told her he wasn't able to confide in her. "I'm only trying to keep people alive, Katniss."

"Like our families?" She asked.

"Like...everyone's families." He answered. "There's so much going on...a lot of it you know about, but some of it..." Peeta was afraid he was saying too much. "I just need you to trust me, Katniss. I swear I'll tell you as soon as I can, but you can't ask me about it anymore. It's too dangerous, okay?"

"I don't want you to risk your life, Peeta." She was suddenly so afraid that he was in more danger now than when he had blood poisoning.

"That's kind of funny coming from you." He gave her a lopsided grin. "Don't you do that every time you step into the woods?"

She scowled and said, "That's different."

"Why? Because it's your life on the line?" He called her out. "And haven't I gone into those same woods with you thus risking my life to spend time with you?" She was getting angry now and he thought it was quite humorous. He could feel her squirming to get out of his grip.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore. I'm going to sleep."

He kissed her bottom lip, which was jutted out in an unintentional pout. "You have no idea what you do to me when you get this way."

"I'm not getting any way. I'm tired," She closed her eyes tightly and tried to lie on her back, but Peeta's arms held her firmly in place. "Can I please lie down?"

"You are lying down," he said in a sing song voice.

She opened one eye up and her breath caught in her throat when she saw the expression in his deep blue eyes. "Don't look at me that way," her voice was shaking as she opened up both eyes and gazed at him.

"What way?"

"Like...like you want to kiss me or something."

Peeta had a sense of deja vu come over him. "But I do want to kiss you, Katniss." So he did. This time there was no timid meeting of lips, but an exploration of mouths.

Katniss was in awe when it had ended several long minutes later. "Peeta, why don't you get frustrated with me when I get mad? Everyone else does. Well, Prim doesn't, but pretty much everyone else does. Haymitch really hates it."

"Because...it's who you are and someone very wise once told me, you can't change who you are." Peeta shrugged his shoulder. "I fell in love with that part of you...with all of you. Not just the side you don't let people see, but the side everyone sees. I like your temper. I like everything about you." He rested his head against hers and said, "I love you for who you are, Katniss. I accept you...all of you." He looked down at her. "Don't you feel that way about me?"

"Yes." She grinned at him. "Though sometimes I swear you're the girl in this relationship. You're such a sap at times." She gave him a playful nudge.

"I'd argue with you if you weren't right," he smiled.

"But...I like that about you. I like that you're...sensitive towards people. All people. That you're friends with Prim."

"I love Prim, Katniss." Peeta confessed to her.

"I know you do and I think that's amazing. Granted, my sister is easy to love, but you don't treat her like everyone else does. You treat her like I do. You take care of her like she's your own flesh and blood. Not even Gale does that and he's known her longer than you have...I think." She furrowed her brow and asked him, "How long have you and Prim been friends?"

"Since Buttercup. I think Gale has known her longer," he answered. Peeta grinned at Katniss and told her what Prim had said to him before they left on the tour. "Know what she said to me?" He didn't

wait for her to answer. "Prim told me she'd never had an older brother before." Peeta looked into Katniss' eyes. "She called me her brother, Katniss."

Katniss couldn't have loved her sister more. She cradled Peeta's cheek and said, "You're going to be very soon. We're going to get married and then Prim will be your sister and my mother will be your mother and she loves you, Peeta. My mother loves you so much."

"Wow," Peeta let out a little burst of air. "That's two moms I'm gaining."

"Two?" Katniss asked.

"Yeah," Peeta blushed. "Effie has sort of...she told me she'd be proud to have me as a son."

For all the things Effie Trinket had done; her constant bickering with Haymitch, the complaining about them not being on schedule, her annoying Capitol accent, calling out Prim and Peeta's names during the reaping. Katniss forgave the woman for every one of them in that instant. "I always knew I liked Effie."

They talked about nothing pressing and just enjoyed each other's company. Enjoyed being young and in love. They shared plenty of chaste kisses and several passionate ones. Effie found them in the morning and got them to their rooms before anyone else saw them.

Once arriving at the Capitol they were brought back to their old quarters in the Tribute Center. Katniss walked in and said sarcastically, "Home sweet home."

Peeta grinned at her and said, "That's my girl. Always the optimist."

Effie told them they had to go to separate quarters, to which they argued, but eventually resigned. They both had to be prepped for their appearance on live television later.

"Katniss you look as though you haven't slept in days. Now go to your room and lie down," Effie ordered her.

"Why can't Peeta come with me?" She stood at her doorway and glared at the escort who only hours before she had adored. "If he's got to get some sleep too then why can't we..."

"Peeta has a fitting he's got to get done with Portia. His suit got damaged on the train and they need to make a new one immediately." Effie pointed her finger towards Katniss' bedroom. "Now go!"

Peeta gave her a shrug of his shoulder and Katniss stormed into her room. She stood at the door and thought about it for a few minutes. 'This was ridiculous. She could just wait for Peeta to finish getting measured for his suit and then sneak into his room or drag him into hers and lock the door. She was sick of everyone telling them what to do.' She cracked her bedroom door opened and peeked down the hall and saw Portia, Cinna, Haymitch, Effie, Peeta and...Flavius! 'What was Flavius doing in a group with them?' she wondered. 'Were they planning on ripping the hair out of her legs again?' Katniss reached down and felt at her calf under her pant leg. Thankfully it was still smooth. Flavius took a seat on the sofa and the rest headed towards the elevator. Katniss opened the door to her room up and headed for Peeta. She wanted to know what was going on.

"Hey," She padded her way towards him with bare feet and they all turned to her with shocked expressions on their faces. "Where are you all off to?"



Peeta glanced at Haymitch and walked to Katniss. He put his arm around her and guided her back towards her room. "I'm going to a friend of Cinna and Portia's workshop. She's got some materials they can use to make my suit for me."

"Doesn't Portia have the stuff you need?" Katniss made an attempt to look back over her shoulder, but Peeta's arm prohibited her from it.

"No. Portia used up the last of it." Peeta hurried her to her doorway and opened it. "Go take a nap, Katniss. You look tired." He kissed her forehead. "I'll try to stop by before our interview with Caesar, okay?"

"Why can't I just go with you?" There was something up with Peeta and she knew it. She wondered if the Capitol...Snow had somehow gotten to him...threatened her through him. "Peeta," she whispered. "I'm worried. I don't want to be here alone."

"You won't be." He pulled her into his arms and whispered into her ear. "Remember what I said last night, Katniss? No more questions." He pulled away from her and said, "Flavius is going to stay here with you and wake you when it's time to prep you in case I don't get back in time, okay?"

"Peeta," Portia called out to him. "We need to get a move on."

"Katniss, I have to go." He held her gently by the arms. "I'll be back soon." He placed a lingering kiss against her lips and whispered. "Trust me."

She clung to his back and whispered hoarsely in his ear, "I trust you with my life...with my sister's life." That meant more to Katniss than her own well being so she hoped Peeta knew how much she was investing in him. "I love you, Peeta. Be careful."

"Love you too." He turned and joined the waiting group.

Katniss peeked around the corner and watched as they all entered the elevator and saw Flavius give her a little wave from his spot on the sofa. She walked to her door and stared at it for a minute. When she opened it she was afraid that when it closed behind her, it wouldn't open again so she reached for a tiny decorative statue sitting on a close by table and propped it in the door so it wouldn't shut all the way. She had no desire to be held captive by the Capitol again. She crawled under the covers thinking she'd never fall asleep, but the moment her head hit the pillow she was out like a light.

She was awoken by the sight of bright orange ringlets bouncing in front of her eyes and purple lips telling her it was time to get up. The rest of her prep team arrived and started working their magic on her. She didn't see Peeta prior to their interview with Caesar. Cinna came in and brought her the dress she would be wearing that evening and Katniss tried to find a smile for her friend, but she was too anxious. Cinna had no clue as to what was about to occur on live television...or did he? She wondered to herself. Katniss stepped into the ankle length cerulean blue gown and couldn't help but think how the color matched Peeta's eyes so closely. The silky bodice hugged her petite frame and flowed out when it reached her hips. The sleeves were short and the collar cut in a deep semicircle, but hid all of her feminine attributes. The back was a mirror image of the front. It was simple...delicate, but when she put it on she actually felt...glamorous. "This is stunning, Cinna."

"Thank you, but I believe in this instance, the woman has made the dress not vice versa," he said in his soft spoken way. He adorned her bare earlobes with tiny matching gems and clasped a chain around her neck that was so thin Katniss could barely feel it if not for the sparkling blue stone that floated two inches below her throat. He

placed her in a pair of flat slip on shoes the same hue as the dress that had one tiny strap across the top of her foot and said, "Ta dah. All done, my darling girl." He faced her towards the mirror. "What do you think?"

Katniss hadn't noticed that her prep team had pulled her hair up and away from her face and it was now flowing down her back in cascading curls or that she was hardly wearing any make up at all. As a matter of fact, she hadn't had any lipstick on whatsoever. She walked closer to the mirror and studied her face. She could make out her freckles across the bridge of her nose and thought, 'Peeta's going to love that.' His biggest complaint when her prep team got her ready was that he could never see her freckles. "Cinna," she turned to her friend. "Thank you." She knew Peeta's proposal tonight wouldn't be what he wanted it to be, but Cinna was going to make it something special for both of them regardless of the circumstances.

"You're very welcome. Now, let's get you in front of that camera before Effie comes in here and yells at me." Cinna gave her a wink.

"It's a big big big day," Katniss was getting very good at her Effie impersonation.

When Peeta saw her, his reaction was exactly what Katniss had hoped for. He was speechless. Something very rare for him. They took their places on stage at the City Center in front of the live audience, with Caesar Flickerman and held hands as they sat on the familiar loveseat the Capitol had obviously deemed their trademark chair. They answered all of the questions...well, Peeta answered most of them, Katniss a few and then Caesar asked what the future held for the, "lovebirds." Peeta got down on his knee and poured his heart out to Katniss and begged her to marry him. Katniss could see that this wasn't an act. Peeta's words were genuine. He had told her the night

before he was only going to ask her to marry him once in his life and this was that one time. She had no choice but to accept his proposal. The Capitol audience went wild. The screens on stage showed scenes from districts around Panem where audiences were cheering. The crowd in District Twelve where Prim and her mother were being featured, was the most excited. For a moment a feeling of bliss ran through Katniss. Seeing Prim as well as her mother's jubilant expressions gave Katniss a sense of hope. Then President Snow himself made a surprise appearance on stage and her heart sank to her stomach. He came to her first and gripped her arms. Katniss questioned him with her eyes and nodded her head as if asking, 'Did I do it?' He tilted his head and gave her a noncommittal smile. Then he reached over and shook Peeta's hand and Katniss could see the blood draining from their knuckles as they performed a deathly handshake and the president congratulated Peeta on their betrothal. Katniss had her answer. Snow wasn't satisfied with their performance while they were on tour. He would never be satisfied with them and there was nothing they could do to prevent his wrath.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter 7,**

### **a hunger games**

### **fanfic | FanFiction**

## **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

### **Chapter Six: Proposals**

**A totally MONGO! HUGE! THANKS to betas for the ideas, corrections and time that went into this chapter. I will now pay you...with my eternal thanks. All hail the betas S and A! Goodness me do I have some dedicated readers! Thank you so much for your kind words in your reviews. I am both humbled and inspired by them. To those of you that simply read... I thank you for taking your time to read this story. Again... I am humbled. And now I bring to you the next installment of...**

## **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Peeta held onto Katniss' hand so tight he was afraid the circulation in her fingers would stop. His eyes scanned the people around them. "Katniss, I think your token made a splash in the Capitol." Almost everyone around them had a mockingjay symbol displayed on them. It was woven into clothing. Embroidered onto materials. There were different jewelry items...broaches, earrings, necklaces...her mockingjay was everywhere.

"Holy cow. I wish Madge could see this." Katniss smiled at him. "I can't wait to tell her about it." Secretly Katniss was thrilled by the fact that President Snow was always being reminded that the people of the Capitol...his people, were reminding him of her on a daily basis.

"Would you look at this food?" Peeta couldn't believe the enormous amount of delicacies laid out before them.

Katniss leaned into him and said, "I want to taste everything in the room."

Peeta let out a little chuckle and tried to relax. It was clear to him that Katniss had. "Then you'd better pace yourself."

"Okay, no more than one bite of each dish." She hauled him to a table laden with soups where she tried one made of pumpkin sprinkled with nuts and seeds. "I could eat this all night," she said as she took her second tiny tasting.

"It matches Effie's wig," Peeta grinned at her and watched as she put the little bowl down. He wasn't a big fan of the one Katniss said tasted like "springtime" but he did like the spicy soup that made him give his head a little shake and cleared his sinuses even though they weren't stuffed up. "Whew, that one packs a wallop."

The cameras seemed to be everywhere, Katniss and Peeta didn't know how they were able to eat a thing considering they barely let go of one another. Peeta would hold onto her plate for her with his free hand and she'd use hers to eat something off of it then vice versa. Several times Peeta would be fed by Katniss so he wouldn't have to let go of her hand and feed himself. "Do not let go of me," she practically ordered him.

"Never again, Katniss." Peeta placed their empty plate down and pulled her closer to him. "I'll never let you go for the rest of our lives." They ambled slowly down another table, sampling miniscule amounts of food, sharing the same plate. Peeta had given up feeding himself and let Katniss take over the duty full time.

"Finish this," Katniss lifted up a tiny pie shaped pastry filled with cheese, meats, and vegetables. The crust was flaky and its filling was savory.

"Mmmm... That's good." Peeta let the flavors mingle on his tongue trying to decipher what they were. "I think I could make that when we get back home."

"Bet it would take a month's worth of hunting and trading to make two of those little pies." Katniss set their empty plate down and took a deep breath. "I can't eat another bite."

"Me either." Peeta rested his head against Katniss' and said, "Would it be rude to go back to the train and take a nap?"

"Effie would, bust her buttons," Katniss let out a little laugh at her escort impersonation.

"Stop making fun of Effie, Katniss."

"I know," she resigned. "She's such an easy target though."

"Well here comes three easier ones...make fun of them," Peeta made a gesture with his chin towards Katniss' prep team.

"Great...my pets," Katniss said under her breath. Before Peeta could ask her about the "pets" comment Katniss let out a big, "Hiiii."

"Congratulations!" Octavia was her bouncy, vivacious self.

"Katniss, we're just thrilled for you two. Thrilled! We can't wait to get you ready for your big day," Flavius added.

"Cinna's already talking about the dresses he's going to design for you." Venia told her.

Octavia studied Katniss and Peeta's empty hands and asked, "Why aren't you eating?"

"We have been, but neither one of us can hold another bite."

The sound of laughter coming from them made Katniss and Peeta look at one another. Katniss arched her brow at him as though asking, 'did I say something funny?' Peeta shrugged and answered, 'I have no clue.'

"Come. Come." Octavia took hold of Peeta's hand and Flavius Katniss'.

"No one lets a full belly stop them from eating," Flavius laughed. "Here," they stopped in front of a table that held tiny wine glasses filled with clear liquid. "Drink this."

Peeta took the glass from him and lifted it to his lips.

"Not here!" Octavia shrieked.

"You have to do it in there," Venia pointed to the doors that led to the restroom. "Otherwise you'll get it all over the place."

Katniss looked at the doors leading to the bathrooms then back at the wineglasses. 'What are they saying?' She wondered. 'No.' She put two and two together the same time as Peeta did.

"You mean this will make me...puke?" He said it as though the mere suggestion of drinking it was enough to do so.

The sound of her prep team's laughter made Katniss feel like she had in fact drank one of the glasses of liquid already.

"Of course, so you can keep eating. I've been in there twice already," Octavia said. "Everyone does it, or else how would you have any fun at a feast?"



Katniss could see the look in Peeta's eyes. It wasn't contempt...maybe it was, but it wasn't directed at her prep team, this much she knew.

Peeta had to force himself to keep his hand steady as he set the glass back down on the table. The Capitol starved thousands of people across the country and threw parties where people vomited for pleasure. He pushed the glass with two fingers back in line with the others and said, "Come on Katniss, let's dance." He needed strength to get through this night. Peeta wished he could go back to last night...back to the hours he and Katniss got to spend huddled under the covers in a train car. The air was chilly, but the blankets and their body heat had kept them plenty warm throughout the night. It had been the only time, since before the reaping, that he felt carefree. That he actually felt young again. Everything changed when he got to the Capitol that day and they went to their rebel meeting. The things he found out made his hair stand on end. Snow had a plan on keeping...ripping he and Katniss apart and the Capitol audience would probably applaud him for it...eventually, but Peeta was confident his proposal had put a stop...or at least a pause to Snow's plan. Then this happened. Peeta spoke his thoughts quietly to Katniss. "You go along, thinking you can deal with it, thinking maybe they're not so bad, and then you..."

Katniss held onto Peeta's back tighter, pulling him nearer to her. She could see all the children, in her mind, that had come to her home over the years. Their bodies so frail and weak from lack of nourishment. Her mother's prescription was more food, but when there was no food to give, what could their parents do? Now that Katniss was rich, they often sent food home with them, but it was just a temporary aid. There would never be enough. Even if Katniss wanted to, and she did want to, she couldn't feed the entire district. So she and Peeta had to be careful how they spread their wealth around.

They didn't just hand things out to people, well Katniss didn't. She was pretty sure Peeta did to a select few around the Hob. Otherwise he made generous trades with people for his breads. He'd take a little something for himself and give them so much more than it was worth. Katniss did the same with her game and the items she foraged for. Winning the Games had provided her and Peeta with more than they could ask for when it came to food and money and what good was having too much if you couldn't give it to those in need? 'Too bad it cost twenty-two children their lives,' Katniss thought to herself.

"Peeta, they bring us here to fight to the death for their entertainment. Really, this is nothing by comparison," Katniss said quietly under her breath to him.

"I know." The entire day's events felt as though they were going to boil over. "I know that. It's just sometimes I can't stand it anymore. To the point where...I'm not sure what I'm going to do." Earlier that night, when President Snow came on stage, Peeta had been tempted to snap the man's neck. The only reason he didn't was because he was sure the consequences of his actions would've been taken out on Katniss. Peeta sighed thinking about the danger she was in...that they were all in. He needed to bring her over to the rebellion's way of thinking. "Maybe we were wrong, Katniss," he whispered in her ear.

"About what?"

He turned his lips directly into her ear as though he were whispering a lover's secret and said, "About trying to subdue things in the districts."

Katniss pulled away and looked from side to side, making sure that no one heard his confession to her. This wasn't the place for Peeta to express thoughts like that out loud. "Peeta," she said under her breath to him as a warning.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Save it for home," she ran a comforting hand down his arm.

"May we cut in?" They heard Effie's familiar Capitol accent. She was standing there with a large man. "This is Plutarch Heavensbee the new Head Gamemaker." Effie turned to him and said, "Plutarch, may I introduce you to our victors, Katniss and Peeta."

Katniss gripped Peeta tightly with one arm and shook the new Head Gamemaker's hand. "Nice to meet you." 'Wonder how long you'll last?' She thought to herself. She studied him for several seconds thinking to herself, 'You look very familiar to me.' Then put the thought out of her head. She had met so many people at the Capitol since winning the Games, she was sure she probably had seen him at the last party she was at.

"Plutarch, is it?" Peeta asked. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance." He shook his hand and smiled brilliantly as though nothing disturbing had happened in the past few minutes.

"Congratulations to you both. You're a very lucky man, Peeta." Plutarch told him.

"I'm just grateful she said yes," Peeta chuckled.

"I'm the lucky one," Katniss forced herself to smile. She was very uncomfortable around any Gamemaker.

"Do you think it would be possible for me to steal her away for a dance?" Plutarch addressed Peeta which irked Katniss. If she wanted to dance with someone she could answer for herself.

Peeta knew Katniss would be upset if he answered for her, but Plutarch had said earlier at the rebel's meeting that he wanted to meet Katniss personally, so he took his life in his hands and said, "Only if I can steal Effie from you."

"That sounds like a fair trade."

Katniss wanted to rip Peeta's arm out of its socket. Trading her for Effie Trinket? Peeta was going to get an earful from her when this night was through, but she had a part to play and perhaps Peeta knew that. Katniss stepped out of Peeta's embrace, but he pulled her back into it for a moment and placed a kiss against her cheek.

"Did I tell you how much I love your freckles?" He whispered into her ear.

It was very hard for her to stay angry with Peeta Mellark no matter how hard she tried. She gave him a forced scowl and said, "Yeah...about a million times." Then took the hand that Plutarch held out to her. It was cold...clammy. She felt like she was being held by a slug. She was sure that her body language was giving off that vibe because he held her far away from him.

"How are you enjoying the party so far, Katniss?" Plutarch asked her as he led her onto the dance floor.

"It's lovely," she tried to sound pleasant. She wasn't sure it was working, but she tried.

"And the food?"

"Delicious," she answered, which was true enough, but after the whole incident with her prep team, it was hard to think about the food without thinking about all the people that were starving at home.

"I find the music to be quite delightful," Plutarch said after a few moments of awkward silence.

Katniss looked up at the musicians who were floating above them on clouds...or things that appeared to be clouds. "How do they do that? Float up there?"

Plutarch looked upwards and said, "Very carefully." He chuckled.

Katniss didn't. She had spent at least three minutes with the new Head Gamemaker, two minutes and fifty five seconds longer than what she felt was required of her, so she made an excuse to leave so she could go and find Peeta. "I'm thirsty. I think I'd like to get a glass of punch."

"I haven't been able to go near punch since you were in your private training session," Plutarch laughed.

'The man is delirious,' Katniss thought to herself. Suddenly it struck her. "Oh...the punchbowl! You're the one who..." she started to laugh as she pictured him falling backwards into the bowl as her arrow struck the apple out of the pig's mouth.

"Yes, and you'll be pleased to know I've never recovered." Plutarch gave her a grin.

'Never recovered?' Katniss thought to herself. 'Twenty-two dead tributes will never recover either,' she wanted to tell him, instead she said. "Good. So, you're the Head Gamemaker now. That must be a big honor."

"Between you and me," Plutarch leaned in a little bit. "There weren't many takers for the job. So much responsibility as to how the Games turn out."

'Plus there's the whole, die if you screw up thing,' Katniss thought to herself. "Are you planning the Quarter Quell already?"

"Oh, yes. Well, they've been in the works for years, of course. Arenas aren't built in a day. But the, shall we say, flavor of the Games is being determined now." Plutarch bent his head down a bit and said quietly, "Believe it or not, I've got a strategy meeting tonight." He stepped back, pulled out a gold watch on a chain from his vest pocket and flipped open the lid. He looked at the time and frowned. "I'll have to be going soon." He faced the watch towards Katniss. "It starts at midnight."

"That seems late for..." Plutarch placed his hand on Katniss' arm to get her attention. He ran his thumb across the crystal face of his watch and for a brief moment the image of a mockingjay glowed into view then was gone. "That's very pretty."

"It's more than pretty. It's one of a kind." Plutarch looked down at her and said, "If anyone asks about me, say I've gone home to bed. The meetings are supposed to be kept secret, but I thought it'd be safe to tell you."

"Yes, your secret's safe with me," Katniss wondered what the big deal was. As if she was going to go blabbing to everyone about a meeting with the Gamemakers.

Plutarch shook her hand and said, "Well, I'll see you next summer at the Games." Then as an afterthought he quietly added, "Remember...it starts at midnight." He patted at the vest pocket that held his watch and walked off.

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"You look pretty as a picture, Prim." Gale gave her a smile as she stood waiting in their doorway for her mother to come down the stairs.

"Thank you," she swung her long dress and the bell shaped woolen coat that covered it from side to side. "Mom didn't want us to go to the square to watch the show tonight, but the camera crew wanted to do some kind of reaction to their interview with Caesar while we were in public."

Gale ran his hand over the back of his head and said, "Yeah, that's what they told us too, but Posy's got a cold so it's just me going tonight."

"I wondered where they were." Prim stood quietly trying to think of something to say. "Wanna come inside? It's warmer in here."

"No. I don't mind waiting here. If you're cold you can go back in." Gale really didn't like going into Katniss' new house. It represented everything he hated about the Capitol.

"Okay," her mother called out. "I'm ready." She pulled on a glove. "Primrose do you have your gloves on?"

Prim held up her hands showing her mother that they were covered. "Wearing my hat too." Her head was covered in a woolen bonnet lined with rabbit fur that matched the collar of her coat. "I'm toasty."

"Good Evening, Gale," Prim's mother greeted him. "Glad you're joining us tonight."

"Hi," he gave her a halfhearted smile. "If you two are ready, looks like those camera guys are ready to take some pictures." Gale was told that he was needed for a publicity shoot even though he was supposed to work that day. He was upset about missing the day's

wages, but his boss informed him that none of his pay would be docked. 'I'll believe that when I see it,' Gale thought to himself.

The cameramen filmed Katniss' family leaving their house with a big smile on their faces. They did three takes since Gale's smile was never quite large enough. They were then taken to the Town's Square in a car, it was Gale's first trip in an automobile, but he didn't let on. He just stared out the window while the Capitol crew made small talk with Katniss mother and sister. Then they were brought to a roped off section of the square so they could watch the live interview between Caesar Flickerman, Katniss and Peeta.

"I'm so excited," Prim said as she bounced out of the car. "Just think, this time tomorrow, they'll be home."

"I know, sweetie." Her mom grabbed her hand and gave her a big smile.

The entire square was filled with snow with the exception of the area that they were going to be in. It had been cleared of all debris...snow...and a medium rectangular rug had been placed on the ground for them to stand upon. Gale looked around and felt like he was being put on display for everyone from his district. On the opposite side of them were Peeta's family. They were standing in a roped off area identical to the one, Gale and Katniss' family were. Gale glanced over at them and caught the baker's eye, his wife was chattering away to the camera. Gale lifted his hand and gave the baker a wave. Then faced front.

The cameraman and interviewer started peppering them with questions. Prim and Katniss' mother were quick to answer. Gale was nervous about answering, but did his best. When it came to his feelings about his "cousin's" relationship with Peeta, Gale was a bit leery when he answered. "I...uh...I don't know Peeta very well. My job



keeps me pretty busy, but...Katniss seems to love him and he did save her life so...yeah..." Gale was at a loss for words. 'The guy has the woman I've been in love with for months. He's the reason I fell in love with her and it drives me crazy knowing he has the ability to bring out a side of her that I've never been able to,' he thought to himself. 'He's been sneaking around with her for months behind the Capitol's back and putting my family at risk. I think he's a self centered, rich, stuck up town kid.' "Peeta's a good guy," he answered. "Katniss is lucky to have him."

"Yes she is," Prim's smile was so bright she could give Caesar Flickerman a run for his money.

Prim was grateful Gale covered the fact that he had a crush on her sister and Katniss hadn't returned his feelings for her. Prim might have been a little girl in everyone's eyes, but she wasn't stupid. She had to grow up fast after her father died and her mother got sick. Prim knew her mom was ill, but Katniss never understood that fact. 'Well,' she thought to herself. 'She probably understands now that she lost Peeta for a little while.' It was Prim that had taken care of their mother. That had helped her bathe, brushed her hair, gotten her dressed...helped her through the dark and lonely nights without her dad around. While Katniss put food on their table, Prim made sure their mother ate it.

The Capitol seal flashed on the giant screen and the crowd around them roared. "Here we go," Prim heard the interviewer say to her left.

Caesar Flickerman was standing on the stage at the City Center in front of the live audience and taking a bow. When the crowd's screams finally died down he said, "So what brings all of you here tonight?" Then he arched his brow in a joking manner. Prim giggled and thought the man was actually quite funny at times. "I can't tell you how excited I am to bring our guests out here. We've been watching

them tour the nation celebrating their victory in the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games and now they're here with us tonight. Ladies and Gentlemen! The Star Crossed Lovers of District Twelve! Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark!"

Prim couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Katniss and Peeta walk onto the stage. Katniss looked so pretty in her dress and Peeta had never looked more handsome. "Oh, mom. They look so good, don't they?" Prim looked up at her mother.

"Yes they do. Katniss is lovely."

"And Peeta...she's a lucky girl," Prim grinned at her mom.

Gale stared at Katniss on the television screen and tried to keep his racing heart from breaking out of his chest. 'She's not yours,' he thought to himself. 'She belongs to Peeta now...she always did.' They were holding hands and waving to the crowd. Both of them smiling, both of them continually getting lost in the other's eyes. As much as it pained him, Gale couldn't help but feel glad for his friend. The last time they had spent time together, she had seemed so lost...so miserable and now...even though she was at the Capitol, she appeared to be content...happy.

The pair took their seat across from Caesar who began his interview. "Welcome back to the Capitol, you two."

"Thank you, Caesar," Peeta answered.

"Thank you," Katniss said quietly.

"Bet you missed us," Peeta teased the man.

"You know we did, Peeta." Caesar let out a laugh. "So how has the Victory Tour been going for you? An emotional journey?"

"Of course," Peeta sat back and put his arm around Katniss pulling her towards him as he took her hand in his. "You can't go through the Games and not feel some sort of remorse for your fellow tributes. They all wanted to be where Katniss and I are right now."

"Living in the lap of luxury," Caesar smiled. 'Living,' Gale thought to himself.

"Something like that," Peeta said with a hint of sorrow to his voice.

"Tell me, which district made the biggest impression on you?"

"We haven't gotten there yet?" Peeta smiled and pulled Katniss' hand closer to him. "We don't arrive in District Twelve till tomorrow."

Prim started clapping and smiling. "Yay, Peeta!" She called out to the screen.

"I've got to admit," Gale smiled down at Prim. "He always knows what to say." The entire population in the square of District Twelve was going crazy over Peeta's answer.

Caesar gave him a nod and said, "You're a very clever boy, Peeta. Let me rephrase my question. Out of all the districts you've been to so far...which one has made the biggest impact on you two?"

"That's a hard one, Caesar. I think all of the districts had their own appeal. They all have special qualities."

"Very diplomatic, Peeta. You may want to consider politics in your future," Caesar let out a laugh. Peeta and Katniss joined him, but it was obvious to Gale that their laughter was forced.

"I think I'm going to stick with baking and art." Peeta smiled.

The conversation turned to their talents and a clip of Peeta showing off his artwork and "Katniss" clothing designs were shown.

"My sister is so talented," Prim winked at Gale.

He bent down and whispered in Prim's ear, "Does she even know what she's reading off of those note cards?"

Prim shrugged her shoulders.

Caesar walked them across the stage where "Katniss" clothing had been on display and Peeta's artwork was sitting out. The camera did close-ups on all of his paintings and Gale couldn't believe his eyes. "Holy cow. Peeta painted those?"

"Yup. He's really talented," this had been the first time Prim had seen all of Peeta's paintings. Now she knew why he didn't want to show them to her.

"Who knew dough boy had it in him," Gale hadn't meant to use his disparaging nickname for Peeta in public.

"What did you call him?" Prim glared up at Gale.

"Nothing."

Prim made a gesture with her finger, calling Gale closer to her and said to him, "Don't you ever call my brother dough boy again, Gale Hawthorne."

Gale stood up and thought to himself, 'When did Peeta Mellark become Prim's brother. Probably right around the time you became her cousin.'

Everyone on the television screen was sitting down again and Caesar asked, "So, Peeta...Katniss...tell us...what does the future hold for you two lovebirds?"

Peeta lifted up the corner of his mouth in a quirky grin and said, "I'm so glad you asked, Caesar." He moved to the edge of his seat and continued. "I've been thinking about this and I thought...since it was here that I told Katniss I loved her it should be here that I do this too." Peeta stood up and then got down on one knee in front of her.

"What is he doing?" Gale said to himself.

Prim started jumping up and down and the cameraman started filming their reaction.

"Katniss," Peeta took her hands in his. "From the moment I laid eyes on you I knew you were the only woman for me. Some people spend their whole lives searching for that one person to complete them...that one person to make them feel whole. Lucky for me I walked into music class at the age of five and there you were." He kissed her hand. "The words, I love you seem so inadequate to express how I feel about you."

This was the worst moment of Gale's life. He knew Katniss was in love with Peeta, but watching this play out on screen was like walking up on them in the woods. It felt like Peeta was stabbing him in the heart with a knife again. Peeta continued to profess his love for Katniss, saying things to her that Gale could never have thought of saying. And when he spoke to her...Gale wondered how he never saw the things in Katniss that Peeta had seen.

Prim was so excited. She looked up at her mother whose face was glowing. Prim had a feeling something like this might happen, but she didn't think it would happen until after Katniss' birthday. Prim and her

mother had talked about this just last night and even though her mom had thought Katniss was too young for marriage they had both agreed that they'd feel much better knowing Peeta would be there for Katniss...protecting Katniss at any cost. She deserved someone to look after her with as much fierce determination as Peeta would.

"Katniss, I stood by and watched as you grew up and I don't want to stand by and watch anymore. Now I want to be a part of the action. I want to grow old with you. So, Katniss Everdeen...will you please do me the honor of allowing me to be your husband and marrying me?" He paused and asked. "Will you marry me, Katniss?"

There were tears in her eyes when she ran her hand down his face and placed it against his chest. "Yes." He leaned up and placed a jubilant kiss against her lips. "Yes!" They stood up and she peppered his face with kisses while calling out over and over again. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

'Well, that's it.' Gale thought to himself. 'Peeta found a way for them to be together when they come home. Now Snow can never keep them apart.' Gale studied his feet. He didn't hear the eruption of cheers surrounding him. He looked at the television screen and saw Prim and her mother's face being shown. They looked thrilled. Gale glanced to his side and couldn't help but smile at them. They hugged each other and Prim bounced up and down. Gale gave the screen another look and noticed President Snow walking out on stage.

Prim screamed in delight when Peeta proposed to Katniss. "She said yes!"

"Of course she did!" Her mother called out to her.

They were both truly excited at the prospect of Peeta and Katniss finally being safe from the Capitol's reach. "Mom, he's going to be so good for her." Prim hugged her mother.

"He's going to be good for all of us." She hugged her back.

Prim couldn't help but jump up and down. Peeta was finally going to be her brother for real. She and her mother were on television, but Prim didn't care how silly she looked. She hoped Katniss and Peeta could see how happy they were for them.

Gale could feel his eye twitching at the sight of President Snow walking up to Katniss. He tried to keep his emotions in check; there was a camera on him. Then he saw the president shake Peeta's hand and Peeta's expression...his eyes when he looked at Snow. It was the look he had on his face right before he jumped out of the bushes and attacked the boy from Four...the look he had when Cato had Katniss pinned down on the Cornucopia...the look he had given Gale in the woods. Peeta looked like he could kill their president with his bare hands. Gale immediately joined Peeta in his hatred for Snow. 'You would have to take this away from them, Snow. They finally get to have their moment...they finally get to be together and you have to worm your way into the mix.' Gale thought to himself which was quickly followed up with surprise. He may not have been thrilled with the fact that he had no chance with Katniss, but it bothered him even more that Katniss and Peeta might not have their opportunity to actually act out on their feelings towards each other because of their president.

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Effie stood to the side of the stage trying her best not to shake uncontrollably. Her eyes went from the television screen that showed the live feed of Katniss and Peeta's interview with Caesar to the actual interview going on to the right of her. Every now and then she'd look over at Cinna, Portia or Haymitch who all had apprehensive expressions on their faces. Well, Cinna and Portia did, Haymitch looked drunk, but who could blame him. If it were up to Effie, she'd be drunk too. She was sure she hadn't helped Haymitch out any by her outburst earlier either.

Haymitch wondered how the night's events would play out. If things were going to go the way Snow wanted or the way the rebellion needed them to go...the way Katniss and Peeta needed them to go. He hoped for the latter. After the information he got earlier in the day, he didn't know what was going to happen.

*Haymitch said his goodbyes to the group of them and made his way into the Library, the rebel's pub that led to the secret room. When he walked in he went to the end booth and took a seat. He expected to be greeted by the waitress with the orange colored skin, but someone else came up to him instead.*

*"Haymitch Abernathy. What a pleasant surprise," Carter Darlington, the sponsor that provided Katniss with her burn cream during the Games greeted him. Without being invited to, he sat across from Haymitch.*

*Meanwhile Cinna, Portia, Effie and Peeta entered a shop belonging to an older stylist. "Tigris, I'd like you to meet Effie Trinket, escort for District Twelve and Peeta Mell..."*

*"No need to introduce either one of them," Tigris interrupted Portia. "They're well known." The woman waved them to the back of her shop and said, "Come. Come. I've been expecting you." She stopped at her*



counter and reached underneath it, moving a few bolts of fabric and switching around some spools of thread then took them to a room in the back. Cinna asked Peeta to help him move a large shelving unit that held multicolored fabrics on it, but not until Tigris gave them the go ahead. Tigris removed the arm off of a mannequin and placed her fingers inside of it. "Now," she said as a soft clicking noise was made from behind the shelving unit. Peeta and Cinna slid the unit over and the wall that had been behind it slid into itself.

"Go," Portia said to Effie, who quickly ducked inside.

"How's she going to move this thing back?" Peeta asked Cinna after he stepped inside of the hidden space.

"Don't worry about me. I've done this before," Tigris said to him.

Once they were all in. The wall slid back into place and Portia quickly lit some candles for them. They were standing in a long, dark corridor. Effie looked around and felt panic racing through her. She couldn't help but wonder if this is what the tributes felt like in the arena. She took the lit candle that Portia handed her and followed the group with Peeta behind her. "Where are we going?" She asked quietly.

"Follow us, Effie. And be quiet until we get there." Cinna said softly.

They entered a dark room, which their candles illuminated. "There's more than one entrance?" Peeta asked.

"You've been here before?" Effie questioned him.

"Yeah. Haymitch took me here, but we came in from a different place," Peeta answered.

*"There are three entrances," Portia told him. "The tavern, Tigris shop and a private residency."*

*"You mean...someone's home?" Effie couldn't believe it. "Who's?"*

*"Mine." They all turned around when they heard Plutarch Heavensbee's voice.*

*"Plu...Plutarch?" Effie really needed to sit down, but the room was barren.*

*"Effie," he walked to her and placed a kiss on her cheek. "I'm happy to see that you've joined us."*

*"How long have you been..." She couldn't seem to find her tongue.*

*"Many many years." Plutarch looked around and asked, "Where is Haymitch? I thought he would've been joining us."*

*"He should've been here by now," Cinna answered.*

*Plutarch took out his watch and checked the time. "We can give him another five minutes and then we must get started. "There's much to discuss." Plutarch ran his thumb across the face of his timepiece and showed it to Peeta. "What do you think, Peeta?" Katniss' mockingjay appeared briefly.*

*"Is that..." Peeta's question hung in the air.*

*"That's the symbol of the rebellion...so far." Plutarch said.*

*"Quite fitting, don't you think?" Portia said with a smile.*

*"We haven't come up with your symbol yet, though we do have something in mind," Plutarch told him.*

*"Why would I need something? Katniss is the face of the rebellion. The one people want to follow. Not me. All I can do is try and talk them into it." Peeta said.*

*"You're equally important to the rebellion, Peeta." Cinna spoke softly to him. "You've both had a startling effect on the people of this country."*

*"Is that why there have been so many items with Katniss' mockingjay in the Capitol?" Effie asked. "I just assumed it was because of how popular the Games were."*

*"Actually..." Plutarch arched his brow. "Cinna had quite an ingenious thought after the Games."*

*"You're giving me too much credit," Cinna smiled. "Portia was the one that did the sewing."*

*"Well, you were both brilliant in the design." Plutarch said.*

*"What did you two do?" Peeta asked the stylists.*

*Portia grinned at Peeta and said, "We knew how enamored everyone was with you and Katniss and since you didn't have a token in the arena, we used Katniss' as...inspiration for a few garments."*

*"Portia embroidered the mockingjay onto blouse and we had it lying out for a few of our customers to see claiming it was a possible design for Katniss to wear on the tour and that was all it took." Cinna said.*

*"Then people came into our studio and requested some specialty items and voila...the mockingjay fad was born."*

*"The next thing you know, everywhere we looked the mockingjay was on display." Peeta and Effie began to laugh. "Now Snow has to see Katniss wherever he goes," Portia said with a lilt to her voice.*

*"That must drive him crazy," Peeta chuckled.*

*"It does," Plutarch said. "I'm surprised he hasn't banned it."*

*Their laughter died down when the door behind them opened and Haymitch walked in with another member of the rebellion. "Sorry it took so long." Haymitch walked to the edge of the group and made an introduction. "Peeta, this is Carter Darlington. He's responsible for getting Katniss that burn medicine during the Games. Carter, you know Effie."*

*Several years earlier Haymitch was told by Plutarch to go to a pub, the Library, two hours before closing time. He was given instructions on where to sit and to order a drink from a specific waitress. He'd be meeting a member of the rebellion, a resident of the Capitol, someone that had money and would be helping to fund much of the rebel's efforts. This person would not say anything to him, but merely drop something on the floor by his feet. Haymitch was to make a polite gesture, pick it up and hand it to the man, wait and then follow him. That man, it turned out, was none other than Carter Darlington. One of the wealthiest sponsors at the Games. Haymitch followed him to the restroom where he learned of the rebel's secret room.*

*Carter shook Peeta's hand and reached out to take a shocked Effie Trinket's hand in his. "You're a...sponsor?" Peeta asked.*

*"Yes," Effie said in disbelief. "You're part of the rebellion?"*

*"I am," Carter answered.*

*"I don't..." Effie had a flustered look on her face. "Why...you have everything, Carter. Why on earth would you support the rebellion?" Effie knew the question came out wrong, but she just couldn't comprehend why a sponsor of the Games would join them.*

*Carter let out a little laugh and said, "Effie, I have everything but the right to marry the woman I love."*

*"Why ever not?" Effie's brows raised.*

*"Because she's a servant." Carter stood back and said, "Even those of us that live in the Capitol have to follow the rules. We can eat till our hearts content...dance...drink...but we cannot love who we choose." He turned to Peeta and said, "That's where we differ you and I." Carter walked closer to him and said, "I would gladly move to your district and risk starvation to be with my lanthe."*

*"I'd rather nobody starve and all of us be able to love whoever the hell we damn well please," Peeta said.*

*There was a brief moment of silence in the room before Haymitch said, "I think we're all here. We don't have anyone else coming tonight, right?"*

*"None that could make it," Plutarch answered. He looked around the room and said, "Let's get down to business."*

*"First of all," Haymitch looked at Effie and said, "Welcome to the rebellion Effie. We're damn happy you're on board."*

*"I'm petrified, but anything I can do to help..." she was scared witless.*

*"Secondly..." Haymitch informed the group about Snow's visits to Katniss and Peeta prior to the tour. They all agreed that Effie was right about him not keeping his word.*

*"That leads me to something pretty...well...some devastating news." Plutarch took a deep breath and said, "Snow is planning on making an announcement tonight at the conclusion of your interview with Caesar Flickerman." Plutarch looked at Peeta and said, "He'd like to make you Flickerman's new co-host...a permanent resident of the Capitol."*

*"Wha...what?" Peeta could barely get the word out.*

*"No," Effie's fingers went to her throat.*

*"Shit!" Haymitch*

*"My God," Carter put his hand on Peeta's shoulder.*

*"I won't do it," Peeta started pacing back and forth around the room.*

*"He can't make me."*

*"He can and he will," Haymitch told him. He faced Plutarch and asked, "How's he planning on handling Katniss?"*

*"He'll offer to have her come by Capitol train on a monthly basis," Plutarch said.*

*"So he can whore her out!" Peeta fell back against a wall.*

*"What do you mean?" Effie ran to his side. "Whore her out?" She looked to Haymitch. "What's he talking about?" Her voice was shrill.*

*"That's what he does, Effie. He sells the victors and if they refuse he kills everyone they love," Peeta sounded defeated.*

*Effie took the candle from Peeta's hand and handed both of theirs to Carter and Haymitch. She took Peeta in her arms and felt him hold onto her for dear life. "We won't let him. We'll take care of her."*

*"How, Effie? How?" Peeta buried his face in her shoulder.*

*Effie ran her hand down Peeta's head and said, "The Capitol audience won't approve of the two of you splitting apart. They just won't."*

*"They'll get over it when Peeta's cracking jokes with Caesar," Haymitch said disgustingly. "Oh, that man really knows what he's doing. I can just see it now...he'll have Katniss come out to the Capitol at first and put all the focus on Peeta...keep her hidden in the background. No public appearances...that's your job, not hers. Then he'll ship her back to Twelve and let people forget all about her...he'll keep the focus on you, kid."*

*"I can turn him down, can't I?" Peeta lifted his face and asked the room.*

*"Sure, if you want your family to die," Haymitch answered in a matter of fact tone. "Hell, he'll probably kill off her family just for good measure."*

*Effie pulled away from Peeta and screamed at Haymitch. "You are not helping!" She looked around the room and said, "None of you are!" She snatched her candle from Haymitch's hand and said, "We need to figure out a plan of action here. Isn't that what you people do? Well, maybe not you," she yelled at the mentor who had the smell of alcohol on his breath. "You're too busy getting drunk all the time." She paused and said, "Tell me, Haymitch...how can you be an effective part of this rebellion if you're constantly drowning your sorrows in the bottom of a bottle? Some mentor you are! If you expect me to help out with this rebellion then I expect you to put in just as much effort and...lay off*

*the damn...BOOZE!" She stood back on her heels and said, "Well...does anyone have any objections to what I've said?" She looked at the expressions of the people around her and they all avoided eye contact with her except for Peeta. Effie pursed her lips and thought for a moment. "Peeta...you're proposing to Katniss tonight...."*

*"You are?" Portia said with a surprised expression on her face.*

*"Yeah," Peeta said with sorrow in his voice.*

*"Not even President Snow can get the Capitol audience to forgive him for separating a husband and wife from one another," Effie said defiantly. "The only solution is for you two to get married as soon as possible and not give him a chance to bring you here." She turned to Plutarch. "When does he expect Peeta to take up the duties of being a co-host?"*

*"He'd like him to start with the Quarter Quell since there's already two mentors for District Twelve...he doesn't think they need Peeta to help the male tribute. After all...Haymitch brought home two victors," Plutarch answered.*

*"Then you'll need to get married prior to that," Effie said. She looked around the room and said, "Comments?"*

*"I agree," Carter said as he handed Peeta his candle back. "That would do it. Can't split up a husband and wife without looking cruel and vindictive."*

*"But he can split us up now and look fine?" Peeta asked.*

*"Yeah, kid." Haymitch frowned. "Now, you two are just a couple of kids that are dating."*



*"You know we're more than that, Haymitch!" Peeta glared at his mentor.*

*Haymitch lifted his hand in defense. "I'm not saying that. I'm saying that's how you can be perceived."*

*"Not after his interview tonight," Cinna said. "Tonight..." he walked closer to Peeta. "All you have to do is show the nation this side of your relationship with Katniss. Let them see what we've seen." Cinna stood in front of Peeta and told him, "Peeta, we've all had the privilege of seeing what you bring out in Katniss on a daily basis. What she brings out in you. All you have to do is share that side of yourselves with the rest of the country and they'll never accept the two of you as separate entities."*

*"The Star Crossed Lovers, won't be star crossed anymore," Portia said softly.*

*"I guess we won't know until tonight," Peeta said glumly.*

*The room was quiet for several minutes until Carter broke the silence. "I guess we need to talk about the uprising."*

*"What uprising?" Effie realized there was a lot she didn't know.*

*"District Eight will be starting an uprising during mine and Katniss interview tonight," Peeta answered.*

*Haymitch took a deep breath and said, "They're going to start it when you propose, kid."*

*"Okay," Peeta stood away from the wall and took a few cleansing breaths. "I'd like to..." he looked to Effie who gave him a nod. "I want*

*to tell Katniss about the rebellion. I don't think its right keeping her in the dark about all of this."*

*Effie jumped on the bandwagon. "I agree wholeheartedly." She turned to the stylists. "What do you two think?"*

*"We agree," Cinna spoke for both of them. "So does Flavius."*

*"I'd like to meet with her first," Plutarch said. "Perhaps at the banquet tonight. Get a feel for her."*

*"I don't really know the girl," Carter said. "I'm not saying she's not trustworthy...I believe she is, but I'm not certain whether or not she can handle this information. I'll have to leave that to those of you that know her."*

*"I'm against it," Haymitch had a look of anger on his face. "That girl won't be able to keep a thing to herself. She'll let something slip or she'll get so damn angry she'll act out or... or..."*

*"I'm telling her, Haymitch!" Peeta stood toe to toe with him. "I'm not keeping this from her anymore."*

*"Don't do it, kid. That girl is too fragile in the head to handle something like this after that guy was shot in Eleven." Haymitch tried to calm himself down. "Maybe you can give her a little information...like Plutarch said...get a feel for her...see what she thinks about fighting for her country's freedom."*

*"I know how she'll feel," Peeta's voice was even and calm. "Do you really think she wouldn't be willing to help Rue's family if she knew what was happening in this nation right now?"*

*"Peeta's right, Haymitch," Cinna's soft spoken voice joined the mix. "Katniss shouldn't be kept in the dark. What we're doing here isn't fair to her. We're using her."*

*"Look," Haymitch let out an exasperated sigh. "This isn't up to me! It's not up to any of us." He pointed his finger around the room.*

*"Then I suggest you talk to your...leader," Peeta spat the word out. "And let her know that if she wants my help after tonight...Katniss is going to be brought into the loop or else I'm out of this rebellion and I'm just like every other resident of District Twelve."*

*"And I'm just an escort of the Capitol," Effie placed her hand on Peeta's shoulder.*

*Portia gave Cinna a nod and said, "And we're just stylists."*

*"Fine! Fine!" Haymitch threw his hand in the air. "Geez!" He put his finger under Peeta's chin and said, "Limited information. You can tell her very limited information when we get home. Nothing specific. No names! No dates!"*

*Plutarch arched his brow and said, "Excellent! Now I really want to meet her."*

*"I can arrange that this evening," Effie told him.*

*"Why do you want to meet her so badly," Peeta turned an accusing eye towards the Head Gamemaker.*

*"I'll have some news about the Quell by this evening. Perhaps I can give her a hint as to what occurred." He pulled out his pocket watch and said, "As a matter of fact, I must be on my way. I have a meeting in an hour with my fellow Gamemakers."*

*"Plutarch," Carter said to him. "Any clue as to when they'll be reading the card?"*

*"We haven't heard a word about it." Plutarch bid his farewells and said to Peeta, "Good luck tonight, Peeta. We are all pulling for you and Katniss."*

*Peeta just nodded.*

*"Now what?" Effie asked.*

*"I don't know about you, but I could use a drink," Haymitch said as he headed for the door, completely disregarding Effie's earlier outburst.*

*"What a surprise." Effie pursed her lips. "Remember we have a show tonight. I'd rather you not be on camera as a sloppy drunk."*

*"I'll make sure he doesn't have too much," Carter followed Haymitch out the door.*

*"We should head back too," Portia said.*

*"Give us a minute," Effie told her.*

*Peeta and Effie stood alone in the room holding their candles. "Effie, do you really think Snow won't make me take that job if Katniss and I get married?"*

*"I don't know, but I do know one thing...no matter what these people say...it is your life...yours and Katniss'. You two are the ones standing on the front lines not them. So when you talk to her...you tell her what you want to tell her. She has every right to know the truth and if you want to tell her the whole truth, then you tell her. If you want to do what Haymitch said, then you do that." Effie gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "As far as tonight goes...let me ask you something," she*

*paused. "Put all of this aside for a moment. Forget about the rebellion...about President Snow and just think about you and Katniss. Are you in love with her?"*

*Peeta's head snapped to attention. "Yes!"*

*"Do you want to marry her?"*

*"Absolutely," Peeta answered honestly.*

*"Then when you ask her tonight, you ask her as though the two of you have an eternity to spend together, because in the depths of my heart I believe that you do. I believe that the two of you will grow old and gray together. I believe that you two will give me somewhere to visit throughout the year and a houseful of grandchildren to play with." Effie gave him a loving grin. "Picture that tonight when you ask her and forget everything else. Nothing should ruin that moment for you, Peeta. Absolutely nothing."*

*Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a lopsided grin and gave Effie a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Effie Trinket."*

*In all her life, Effie could never imagine saying such a thing to a tribute...a victor, but this boy...this man, was so much more than that to her. "I love you too, Peeta."*

Haymitch stood at the side of the stage and listened as Peeta poured his heart out to Katniss. He was on one knee telling her how much he loved her and asking her to marry him. Haymitch couldn't help but feel bad for the kid. Sure the boy loved Katniss, but what kind of future would they have if things didn't work out the way the rebellion had planned? What if Snow came out after the proposal and still offered Peeta the job as a co-host for Caesar Flickerman? The thing Haymitch didn't say out loud during the rebel's meeting was how Snow could

keep Katniss at the Capitol full time and sell her body to all sorts of people. It would kill her spirit...he'd surely douse the Girl on Fire's flames.

"The words, I love you seem so inadequate to express how I feel about you." Effie listened to Peeta as he spoke from his heart. "There are times when I look at you and I...I can't breathe, Katniss. You literally take my breath away." He lifted his hand and rubbed a piece of her hair between his fingers and Effie could feel his love for her. "I'm going to tell you something about yourself that I don't think you know," he paused. "Everything about you is exquisite. Your skepticism and hesitation at accepting a compliment, how humble you are when you finally say thank you after I tell you that you're beautiful. Your inner strength. Your determination. The way you refuse to back down during an argument...even if you know you're wrong...you'll fight till you're blue in the face trying to convince me you're right and I love that about you. The wonder and magic in your eyes when you look at your sister." He held his hands in hers and rubbed his thumbs across her knuckles. Effie's heart ached when he said to her, "And underneath all of that strength...determination...stubbornness and fire, I see the shy...frayed pieces of your heart...your soul...all the things that you hide from everyone. Those are the pieces that add up to the most amazing woman I've ever met. They add up to you. And I wouldn't change a thing." Effie felt a surge of pride rush through her when Peeta not only asked Katniss to marry him, but proposed to her entire family. "All I want to do is spend my life with you in District Twelve. You...me...your mom...Prim... I want to spend my life taking care of all my girls, because I love them too, Katniss. And I want to take care of all of you." He took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to ask you to do something for me and it's going to be hard for you. I'm going to ask you to surrender to me, Katniss. To surrender to our love." Peeta's smile lit up the stage. "Katniss, I stood by and watched as you grew up because I was too afraid to tell you how I felt and I don't want to

stand by and watch anymore. Now I want to be a part of the action. I want to grow old with you. So, Katniss Everdeen...will you please do me the honor of allowing me to be your husband and marrying me?" He paused and asked. "Will you marry me, Katniss?"

Haymitch knew Katniss would say yes. She was the one that suggested the proposal. She did a pretty good job accepting too, he thought. She was excited. She even had tears in her eyes. He thought maybe she could act after all.

Effie could tell that Katniss would've said yes to Peeta regardless of the situation at hand. There was no way she could've turned down a proposal like that. Peeta had poured his heart out to her and from the expression on both their faces, neither one of them were thinking about the Capitol, the rebelling districts or President Snow.

When the man himself walked onto the stage, Effie, Cinna, Portia and Haymitch all exchange worried looks. Effie reached out and grabbed the first hand she could. It was Haymitch's that pulled her closer to him for support.

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Peeta walked across the banquet room arm in arm with Effie. "Thank you," he leaned his head down towards hers. "You were right," he said on a whisper. "Snow looked like he didn't know what to do."

"We had no idea what he was going to say when he came on that stage," Effie admitted. "We all breathed a sigh of relief when he said he would throw the wedding here at the Capitol."

Peeta had to admit, President Snow's appearance gave him the chills. "Effie, I really thought he was still going to..." Peeta didn't think he should say anything out loud considering where they were. "...I thought he might start some trouble when he came out there." He grinned. "Bet me popping the question to Katniss irked him though."

"Peeta, your proposal was lovely. Truly," Effie rubbed his hand.

"I just spoke from my heart, like you told me to." They stopped at the table full of cakes and confections.

"Excuse me," Effie said to the waitress. "Would it be possible for Mr. Mellark to speak with one of the bakers that created the cakes?"

"Yes, ma'am," she immediately ran to find the proper people.

"Effie," Peeta turned to her. "With all that's happened. I forgot to thank you." He couldn't believe he let it slip his mind.

"For what?" Effie asked.

"My birthday present. It was...is...remarkable. How did you know that's my favorite work of art?" Peeta didn't remember ever mentioning that Starry Night was his favorite to anyone but Katniss under the oak tree and that was well before he even met Effie.

"I didn't," Effie told him. "I saw the print and thought you'd appreciate it."

"Well, I do. I hung it in my bedroom." Peeta smiled. "When I can't sleep at night it gives me something beautiful to look at." He thought for a moment. He wasn't sure if he should tell her, but lately he felt like he could tell her anything so he confessed, "You know you, Portia and Cinna were the only ones that remembered my birthday."



"What?" Effie said with surprise. "What about your father?"

"To be fair, I stopped by the bakery that day and they were really busy so..." Peeta shrugged. "Then we left for the tour a few days later and..."

"Didn't Katniss wish you a happy birthday?"

"She didn't know it was my birthday." Peeta picked up a bite sized lemon tart. "Kind of weird...we've known each other for awhile, but we never bothered to ask what day our birthdays were. Guess it's never been a big deal in our district. Most people can't really afford to celebrate things like that." He popped the tart in his mouth.

"How would you like to see the real painting?" Effie asked.

"You mean..."

"Manners, young man," Effie chided him for talking with his mouth full.

When he was done with his tart he asked. "You mean see the actual Starry Night! THE painting from before the Dark Days?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"How?" He wondered.

"When you come back for the Games, we'll take some time and go to the museum. I'll take you on a tour and you can explain all the works of art to me."

"I'd really like that, Effie."

"So would I," she smiled. "In the meantime...I have some business to attend to." She looked at her watch and said, "We've got a short

period of time left here and I need to excuse myself. You enjoy yourself with the bakers."

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Technically they were still on the Victory Tour, but being back in District Twelve brought a sigh of relief to Katniss. She barely had time to herself when she reached the mayor's house. Effie ushered her to the third floor where she was prepped for the dinner that was being held at his home. Katniss was actually looking forward to this dinner. Her mother, Prim and her friend, Madge, the mayor's daughter, would be there. Her prep team worked their magic on her once again, putting her in a full length, strapless silver gown. Her hair was pinned up tonight with tiny braids and twists surrounding a large bun. Loose strands of her hair were strategically placed around her face and trailing down her back, to make it look as though they had fallen out of its confines. It was delicate and completely fascinating to look at. Katniss studied her prep team's work in the mirror and wondered if Peeta would like it. She knew he'd like the dress. It was the same hue as her eyes. Her mind kept floating back to the things Peeta had said to her the night before. Her reaction to them. Had she said the right things? Or was she letting her emotions get the best of her? After Peeta confessed that secret to her last night, Katniss felt as though they were at the end of the Games again and she was standing in the arena, by the lake, holding a handful of berries. Her heart began to race as her mind went back to the train ride home from the Capitol.

*Katniss changed into her pajamas and wrapped a robe around herself. She took out the pins from her hair and let it drape around her face. She tucked her feet into her slippers and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Peeta's proposal to her that night was... She lifted her fingers*

*to her rapidly beating heart and took a deep breath. 'You knew he was going to ask you to marry him, Katniss.' She thought to herself. 'Yes, but the way he asked...oh, the things he said. He asked you to surrender to him. What did he mean by that? I honestly don't know. He's waiting for you. You've been standing in your bathroom for thirty minutes avoiding him.' She blew out the breath she had been holding and headed to the last train car where Peeta had recreated their little campsite for them. The windows were opened and the room was chilly, but Katniss knew it would be warm under the goose down quilts.*

*"Hi," Peeta smiled up at her from his spot on the floor. "I was wondering where you were."*

*"I'm right here," she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face when she saw him.*

*He lifted the covers as an invitation. "It's cold tonight. Want me to close the windows?"*

*"No." The thought of complete privacy outweighed the knowledge of being a little chilly. She crawled under the covers with him and lay flat on her back next to him instead of curling up in his arms like she normally did.*

*They both stared up at the stars that flew by without saying a word for several minutes.*

*"So...a Capitol wedding," Peeta said.*

*"I guess so," Katniss replied.*

*More time passed...more silence... Finally Peeta said, "Your mom looked pretty happy on the television screen tonight."*

*"Yeah," Katniss had to agree. "I was kind of surprised to see her look so...excited."*

*"I wasn't surprised by Prim's reaction though," Peeta chuckled.*

*"Me either," Katniss smiled. "That sister of mine is probably at home already making our wedding plans." She glanced at Peeta who was smiling. "Think your family will be okay with it?"*

*"I don't really care, but...yeah...I'm sure they'll be fine with it." Peeta rolled onto his side, bent his arm at the elbow and propped his head on his hand. "My dad is going to be ecstatic."*

*"You mom is going to freak out," Katniss put an arm under her head. "That woman hates me."*

*"You threatened her life," Peeta grinned down at her.*

*Katniss got very serious and said, "She threatened yours, Peeta."*

*He bent down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I won't force you to get along with my mother, but...can you try not to shoot her with an arrow?"*

*Katniss' eyes were closed when she said, "As long as she doesn't hurt you anymore...I think I can do that." She opened her eyes and looked up into his smiling face. "You think that's funny?"*

*"I think your fierce desire to protect me is...fascinating...noble. It says so much about who you are."*

*"It says I'll kick your mother's ass if she lifts a finger to you again. That's what it says." Even though Peeta had explained it to Katniss, she still couldn't understand why Peeta loved her temperamental side.*

*"There you go again..." He flattened his arm out and placed his head on it. "...still can't take a compliment." He turned her face towards his with one finger. "Just say, thank you, Peeta."*

*"There was a compliment in there?" She paused. "Fine. Thank you, Peeta," She said as she rolled her eyes.*

*He let out a little laugh, "Oh, Katniss. That's one of the many reasons I love you." He kissed the tip of her nose.*

*He began tracing one fingertip around the features of her face, lingering at the bridge of her nose...her freckles. He paused long enough to put his hand on her waist and turned her entire body towards him. Katniss found herself compliant, barely moving under his tender touch. His fingertip went back to its exploration of her facial features. Her eyebrows, her lips...chin. The entire time Katniss kept thinking about his declaration of love that night. The things he had said to her. The word surrender kept popping into her head. She felt like she was surrendering right now. 'Why hadn't she wanted this in her life?' She asked herself. 'You never wanted marriage, Katniss. Remember? Yes, but...the things he said to me...the way he feels about me...he called me magical...exquisite. Me. Exquisite! He also wants you to surrender yourself to him. Are you ready to give up all that you are for a...man?' Katniss felt his legs begin to entwine with hers and the pulse in her neck began to speed up. Was she willing to give up her independence for Peeta? Did she even have to? Wasn't that something she should ask him? "Peeta?"*

*"Hmmm?" His nose was nuzzling her neck.*

*"When you said you wanted me to surrender to you...what did you mean?"*

*He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I can't answer that for you, Katniss. You have to figure that out on your own, but when you do...you'll understand why I said it...why I asked you to do that."*

*"Do you want me to...to stay home and be a housewife or something?" She was starting to worry that he expected her to be a regular wife. That was not going to work for her.*

*Peeta let out a huge laugh and said, "Katniss, I think we both know I'd be the better housewife out of the two of us." He ran a hand down the side of her torso and said, "You'll figure it out, Katniss. Just don't over think it."*

*Now she was getting upset. 'Why couldn't he just come right out and tell her?' She asked herself. She pulled his hand off of her waist and said, "Just explain it to me." She was starting to feel really stupid for not understanding.*

*"I can't, Katniss. It's...It's..." Peeta let out an exasperated sigh.*

*"What? What is it?" She gave his shoulder a little push. "Just explain it to me."*

*"It's hard to explain. All I can say is..." he cradled her face in his hands. "...it's going to hit you like a ton of bricks and you'll say to yourself, oh, that's what Peeta meant. Until then...you're just going to trust in yourself...in the fact that you love me."*

*"Well...have you done it? Have you surrendered to me?"*

*"A long, long time ago." He placed a soft kiss against her lips. "Now can we quit fighting? We just got engaged. I'd like to...you know...celebrate that a little."*

*Katniss thought about it for a second. She still had some issues going through her mind, like why he disappeared when they first got to the Capitol and what his big secret was. Since she was already in a fighting mood she thought she'd go for it. "I have a few more questions first."*

*Peeta took his hands off of her face and said reluctantly, "Let 'er rip."*

*"What the hell is going on with you? What's all this..." she realized her voice was getting a little loud so she quieted down. "...this secrecy? Where'd you disappear to earlier and don't say to get a fitting because that's a load of bull."*

*Katniss did not like the expression that came over Peeta's face. Not one bit. In a matter of seconds his eyes went from being in love to being afraid. "Do we have to do this now, Katniss?"*

*She was tempted to tell him no, but if he was scared of something, then she needed to know what it was. "Yes, we do."*

*He rolled onto his back and laid his arm over his eyes. "When I dreamed about this night...and I did, you know? I dreamt about proposing to you...about you saying yes to me...wanting to marry me...like actually wanting to...not having to..." he turned his head away from Katniss, but kept his arm over his eyes. "This isn't what I thought it would be. None of it is." She could hear his voice starting to crack. "There's so much I need to tell you tonight, Katniss...so much we have to talk about. I don't know why I thought I could avoid facing it all. I thought maybe...if we...maybe we could have just a few minutes to pretend like your 'yes' was real..." Katniss' heart shattered into a million pieces when she realized that he was crying. Peeta wiped his eyes with his thumb and index finger.*

*'What are you doing to this man, Katniss?' She asked herself. 'He's done nothing but love you and you're lying here torturing him because you can't face all the wonderful...beautiful things he said to you tonight, because that's what you're doing and you know it. You're picking a fight with him because it's easier than actually accepting all the love he offered you on that stage.'* Words never came easy for Katniss. There were times, when she didn't think about it, when she just allowed her heart to do the talking, then things usually came out okay. She was really hoping this would be one of those times. She lifted their blankets and rolled her body over so she was lying on top of him.

*"Wha...What are you doing?" Peeta looked up at her with a shocked expression.*

*Katniss had no clue how to answer him because she didn't know what she was doing. "Shhh," she brushed her fingers across the wet spots on his face to dry his tears. Her hair had fallen down around their faces and acted as a curtain around them. Katniss had never been completely flush against Peeta before, it was an entirely new feeling looking down into his eyes. "Don't cry. Please don't cry." She hated that she caused this pain on what should have been one of the happiest nights of their lives.*

*"Katniss I have to tell you something," his voice was thick with emotion.*

*"You don't have to tell me anything right now." She was going to give to him what he wanted. A few moments of normalcy. A minute in which they could just celebrate their engagement without thinking about why they got engaged, where it happened or that they were on a Capitol train, though their surroundings were quite romantic. Katniss brushed the hair away from Peeta's forehead. "I don't want you to*



*think about anything but you and me right now. Can you do that for me, Peeta?"*

*"But Katniss..."*

*"Shhh..." She brushed the tip of her nose against his. "Close your eyes for me, Peeta." He had done this for her countless times. Katniss didn't know if she could pull off the same results as Peeta did for her, but she tried her best when she saw his eyelids close. "It's only you and me right now, Peeta. That's all. No one else matters. Nothing else exists." She reached down and took one of his hands and placed it against her heart. "See, Peeta? It's just you and me. Can't you feel my heart beating?" She moved his hand to his heartbeat and back to hers again. "Feel that? That's what happens when it's just you and me." Their hearts began to race. She moved his hand to her waist and ran hers through his hair. "Let all your worries go and when you open your eyes, all I want you to see is me." Katniss stared down into his face and whispered, "Open your eyes, Peeta."*

*He gazed up at her and let out a cleansing breath. "Thanks."*

*"No need to thank me. I'm the one that needs to say thank you." Her hands couldn't stop touching his face...his hair. "Thank you for all the wonderful things you said about me tonight...the wonderful compliments you paid to me. It never ceases to amaze me the way you see me, Peeta."*

*"I see you for who you are, Katniss."*

*"Sometimes I think you know me better than I know myself." Loving him was so easy...so right. She gave him a soft smile and said, "I'm going to marry you. I get to spend every single day of my life loving you."*

*"I get to kiss you whenever I want," Peeta ran his hands down the sides of her torso.*

*"Are you thinking of anything other than me right now, Peeta?" Katniss wanted to make sure he was no longer distracted.*

*"I can honestly say...you are the only thing on my mind right now," he grinned at her.*

*"Good." She moved closer to him and whispered against his lips. "I'm going to kiss you now, Peeta. We're going to celebrate our engagement." She placed her lips against his and closed her eyes allowing her emotions to take over. She was in love...so in love. Their kiss was slow...torturous and full of heat. Peeta had said they could pretend that her "yes" was real, but in that moment, Katniss knew...absolutely...without a doubt that it was. She was willing to give her heart...her soul...her everything to this man. She was willing to... Katniss pulled her lips away from Peeta's for a brief second and said, "I surrender, Peeta. I do."*

*Peeta wrapped one arm around her neck and the other around her waist. Her hair had gotten mixed into the kiss at some point and Katniss had to pull it away from their faces. When she lifted herself up she noticed a troubled look on Peeta's face. "Katniss?" He ran his hand down her arm. "I don't want to wait to get married."*

*"Huh?" 'Surely their celebration hadn't made him want to hurry their proceedings,' she thought to herself.*

*He tugged her until she was flush on top of him again. "Please, Katniss?" He pleaded in her ear. "Let's get married as soon as we can."*

*"What's the rush?"*

*"I can't live without you, Katniss."*

*"You don't have to," she smiled against his cheek.*

*"How are we going to get through our nights without each other? This is it. This is our last night together." Peeta clung onto her.*

*Until he said it, Katniss hadn't even let the thought come to mind.  
"Oh...um..." She gripped his upper arms.*

*"Please, Katniss?" He kissed her ear...cheek. "Let's not wait."*

*"Peeta...my mother won't..."*

*"I'll talk to her. I was going to anyway."*

*"No. I'll talk to my mom. You don't have to," Katniss said.*

*"Katniss, it's only proper that I speak to your mother and ask her for permission to marry you. I would've done that if I didn't have to propose on the tour." Peeta said firmly.*

*Katniss looked into his eyes and said, "What did I do to deserve you?"*

*"I ask myself the same question every day."*

*She thought about it for a second then said, "Peeta, I think it's great that you want to talk to my mother, but I don't see the need to rush into the wedding. I have no desire to race back to the Capitol. I can always sneak out of my house and come over to your place," she gave him a mischievous grin.*

*"No, Katniss," he gripped the sides of her head firmly. "You don't understand. Please..." He planted kisses all over her face. "We have to. We have to."*

*"Why?" That feeling of dread was starting to take over again and Katniss didn't like it.*

*"It's time to talk, Katniss." Peeta took a deep breath and blew it out.*

*"Okay." Katniss started to roll off of him, but he stopped her.*

*"No. Wait." His arms held her firmly in place. He stared longingly into her eyes and asked, "Can you tell me you love me?"*

*Katniss mustered up every ounce of emotion possible and said, "I love you so much, Peeta."*

*"I love you too, Katniss. Please try and remember that." He kissed her softly and tucked her head under his chin then wrapped his arms around her frame. "I need you to listen first and ask questions later. It'll be hard, but you'll need to do it, okay?"*

*"Okay," she said against his chest.*

*"There are people...victors...residents of other districts...of the Capitol, that don't like what's happening in this country. That want to change things."*

*"Like who?" Katniss started to lift her head off of his chest.*

*"Katniss, I'm saying this with love. Please shut up. Please." He placed a hand on her head and pressed it back down. "These people they're just like you and I...like Gale. We all feel this way. None of us like what's going on, but we can't really do anything about it. What can one person do, right? Well, that's what people thought until the moment a girl stood out in a crowd and said, 'I volunteer as tribute' and took her baby sister's place and a boy faked an alliance with the Careers to save the woman he loved." That feeling of dread that Katniss had*

earlier was now churning in her gut. "You and I showed the people of this nation that one person can make a difference and two can change the rules...change the world." Peeta placed a kiss on the top of her head. "Since the end of the Games I've been helping this small group of people try to make a change." Katniss dug her fingers into Peeta's ribcage. "I was told not to tell you for your own protection, but I wanted to. They told me things...things I never want to repeat...things that happened to them...things that I never want to happen to you. And earlier today I found out about something..." Peeta kept kissing her head over and over again then placed his cheek against her hair. "Snow was planning on appointing me as Caesar Flickerman's new co-host at the Capitol." Katniss' head flew up. "That's why he was waiting in the wings, but my proposal put a stop to that. The thing is...I'm still scared, Katniss. I'm still worried he might try to separate us like that. The Capitol audience...they'd forgive him if I were on TV all the time and you just made the occasional trip out there to see me...it's not like you're my wife yet, right?"

"Right." Katniss could barely breathe. President Snow was trying his hardest to punish them...he had almost made Peeta move to the Capitol...he still could...Peeta was in a band of...what? Rebels? "What the hell have you been keeping from me, Peeta Mellark?"

"I know, Katniss. I know. And please don't be mad. I told you as soon as I could about the Snow thing. There was no place safe to do that at the Capitol."

"And the other thing?"

"I told you already, there were other lives at stake. I couldn't just put their lives in jeopardy without their say so."

"Aren't they still in jeopardy? What's changed that situation?" Katniss asked.

*"Me. I told them the only way I'd continue to help is if I could tell you what was going on."*

*"And who's a part of this band of hoodlums?" Katniss pointed a finger at him. "I know Haymitch is the one that got you into this thing so don't pretend that he didn't."*

*"I can't give you names. That's too dangerous."*

*"And what am I supposed to do with all of this information?" She pushed against his chest and sat up, taking the blankets with her.*

*He followed suit and hugged his arms due to the obvious chill in the air. "That's up to you I guess."*

*"Up to me?" She was furious. Peeta had been keeping so much from her. Had he told her about this earlier things would've been different on the tour, she was sure of it. "You knew...all this time you knew about these things and you never said a word to me," her voice was low and filled with anger. "I went out there and said those things in Eleven..." a thought hit her. "Did you know what they were going to do? That they were going to..." She was trying not to yell at him.*

*"No, Katniss. I had no clue about that. None of us did." Peeta tried to move closer to her, but she just pulled away wrapping the blankets tighter around herself for protection. "We knew that some of the districts were going to test the waters...see if they could push past the Peacekeepers...test how strong their defense was, but that's it." Peeta hopped to his knees in front of her and grabbed onto her arms through the blanket to make her face him. "You have to believe me, Katniss. I swear. I had no idea."*

*"I have to believe you?" She glared at him. "Why should I? You've been lying to me this whole time, Peeta."*

*"Do you think I wanted that to happen in Eleven? That I wanted to get someone killed like that?" Peeta's voice cracked. "I thought you knew me better than that."*

*"So did I." She snapped. She was too angry for tears, but they were burning in the back of her nose. "Now I feel like I have no clue who you are."*

*"It's me, Katniss." His voice was desperate. "I'm the same person..."*

*"You are not!" She yelled as she faced him head on.*

*"Keep your voice down. Someone might hear," he warned her.*

*She didn't want him telling her what to do, but she knew he was right. "The Peeta I know would never have kept these things from me. He told me everything. He trusted me."*

*"I do trust you."*

*"Then why did you keep this from me? I could've done something. I could've..." She had no clue what she could've done. "That man came to my house, Peeta. Snow threatened my family...Prim. At the time I wondered why he would do such a thing. Why he thought I was such a huge danger to him...I mean...it was just..." She pounded her fists against Peeta's chest. Her tears burned as they fell down her cheeks and the blanket pooled around her waist. "They were berries! Berries!" Her fists were pummeling against him. She wanted it to be Snow she was beating. She wished she could go back to the arena and let Cato finish her off. "Why didn't we just eat the damn things? Why?"*

*Peeta pulled her into his arms. She was fighting him. She didn't want him to hold her. She wanted nothing to do with him. She pushed and pounded her clenched hands against his chest, but he wasn't letting*

*her go. He'd never let her go and she knew it. She abhorred the fact that the one person she needed the most was the same person she was so damn mad at. Her body, tears...emotions, got the best of her and she let herself be held by Peeta. There was still rage inside of her, but she needed his arms to help her come to grips with what was happening. "We didn't die because Seneca Crane saved our lives," Peeta said softly. "Seneca Crane died in the hopes that we'd inspire the people of this nation to take a stand and make a change."*

*Katniss couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Seneca Cra..." she pulled back and stared at Peeta.*

*"Crane," he finished for her. "He was one of us. He was a part of them before I was. Unfortunately, I never got to meet the man, but I know what he did and Katniss...he died...that man knew what he was doing and he died...for us. So you and I could go on living."*

*"I never asked him to do that." Katniss didn't need to feel responsible for yet another man's death.*

*"Neither did I, but he still did it." Peeta was shivering uncontrollably, his teeth practically chattering.*

*Katniss glanced at him and lifted the quilt. He wrapped the end over himself and scooted next to her. This was a lot of information to process. She began to think to herself. 'Snow had alluded to the fact that there was a possibility of uprisings in the districts because of their actions with the nightlock, but could a handful of berries really be so powerful? Seneca Crane seemed to think so. He died because of it. Were these people that Peeta had aligned himself with strong enough to overthrow the Capitol's government? And then there was this whole thing with Peeta being taken away from her and brought to the Capitol to work alongside of Caesar Flickerman.' Katniss was livid with Peeta, but she found the thought of losing him more frightening than the*



*thought of the districts uprising against the Capitol. "I can't let him take you from me, Peeta." She turned to him and put her legs over his. Her anger was still there, but so was her love for him.*

*He pulled her into his lap and cocooned them inside of the blankets. "Then let's get married."*

*"How soon can we do it?" She rested her head against his shoulder and tried to push her feelings of betrayal aside.*

*"Effie said it might take a few months to prepare...since we have to do it at the Capitol."*

*"You talked to Effie about this?" For some reason this didn't really surprise Katniss.*

*"Yeah. Is that okay?" He asked sheepishly.*

*"Yes," she stroked his cheek out of habit. "I'm glad you have her. She's good for you. She loves you."*

*"She loves you too, Katniss." Peeta told her.*

*Katniss found that hard to believe, but she wasn't going to get into it. She had already had too many things to argue with Peeta about. "A few months..." she thought out loud. "...so we'll have a spring wedding."*

*"Okay. Spring it is. As long as it's before the Quell."*

*"Why?" Katniss looked at him.*

*"That's when Snow wanted me to start my...new job," he said with disgust. "I was so scared when he walked on stage tonight. I really thought he was going to announce me as Caesar's new co-host then*

*he said all that stuff about throwing us a wedding and having to pass a law so your mom would let us get married and...I knew that I had bought us some time."*

*"So how did you find out about it, Peeta? What Snow was going to do?"*

*"There was some inside information passed onto our little group." He told her.*

*Katniss didn't have to get the names from Peeta. She knew from earlier in the day when they all disappeared out of their suite at the Tribute Center, who was a part of Peeta's alliance. "We need to pick a date. Something definitive and make Effie work around that."*

*"When we get home, I'll talk to your mother and then we'll choose something together. You, me, your mom and Prim. We'll do it as a family." Peeta kissed her softly. Katniss let him.*

*"Okay." She liked that he referred to her family as his now. It was that comment that softened her feelings of resentment for him and all that he had kept secret from her.*

*They sat that way for several minutes before Peeta asked her, "Katniss? How much are you willing to risk to end the Games...starvation...death in this country?"*

*"Huh?" Katniss' brow furrowed.*

*"What would you risk?" Peeta asked. "Let's say you and I could make that change. The hope that Seneca died for...would you take that chance with me?"*

*"Peeta? We just spent this entire tour trying to put a stop to the districts rebelling. Are you asking me to do the opposite now?"*

*"We've already done the opposite? After what happened in Eleven, I'd say the districts have already started to rebel."*

*"You think we should...what? Encourage it?" Katniss lifted herself slightly away from him. "No. Absolutely not. Do you have a death wish?"*

*"Katniss, you don't understand..."*

*"No, you don't understand." Katniss stared at him. "I know this group of yours wants this to happen, but I don't. I do not want this weight put on my shoulders. I've got enough to worry about with Snow coming after my family. I want no part of this...rebellion you've gotten yourself into and I don't want you to be a part of it either." She had to make him see her way of thinking. "How many more deaths do we have to be responsible for? We can't go around this country and ask these poor...weak people to put their lives on the line and try to fight the Capitol. We just can't." She started shaking her head thinking about the old man that was put to his knees in District Eleven and shot to his death in front of everyone. "It's bad enough that one man...possibly three people died in Eleven because of us. How many more have to die? And now Snow wants to exact his revenge by taking you away from me, Peeta. So, no...I can't encourage the fighting to start and I'm surprised you want to." She was tired of fighting. It seemed like her whole life was consumed with battle. "All I want is peace. I want to live our lives together...like you said. You, me...my mom...Prim...our family in Twelve. I want to be...normal. Can't we just be normal for once?" She was pleading with him.*

*Peeta was so quiet then he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and said, "Okay, Katniss. We can be normal...not that I know what that is,"*

*he grinned. He pulled them down so they were lying on their little bed again. Him on his back, she on top of him. Their legs wrapped around each others, her head tucked under his chin, her hand pressed against his chest. His arm holding her while his hand stroked the lower part of her back. The other played with her hair. "Just imagine it, Katniss... In a few months we'll be married. We can spend every night of our lives like this. Sleeping in each other's arms. You'll hunt for us...bring home some rabbit..."*

*"That's your favorite," she said dreamily.*

*"You know it is," he smiled against her hair. "I'll wake up in the mornings and bake for all of my girls."*

*"I love it when you call us that. Like we belong to you...we're yours."*

*"You are mine. All of you." He kissed her lightly against the top of her head. "I'll teach Prim how to paint."*

*"I'll teach you how to swim," she yawned against his chest and let the sound of his voice lull her into a peaceful slumber.*

*"We'll be happy, Katniss. So happy."*

Katniss stared at her reflection in the mirror. The silver dress Cinna had designed was lovely, but she preferred the blue one she wore when Peeta proposed to her the night before. That one would always hold a special place in her heart. She let out a little breath and tried to get thoughts of last night out of her head. She decided to go find Madge and stop by mayor's study to say a quick hello before the festivities started. As she walked down the staircase to the second floor that held Madge's bedroom and her father's study, Katniss couldn't help but think she made the right choice when she decided not to try to incite rebelling within the districts. She didn't want to tell

Peeta, but she had a fear that he would be the one forced to his knees with a gun to his head if they tried anything. It would be different if there was actually something...entire districts at war with the Capitol and not just Peeta's little band of rebels. If others were waging war, Katniss could support that...get behind it. Of course, she would. Who wouldn't want to overthrow the Capitol? But to try and actually entice it? That was a completely different story. She stuck her head through the Mayor's open door. "Hello?" She actually liked Madge's father, he was quite a nice man considering he worked for the Capitol. He wasn't in the room, but Katniss' attention was captured by the television that was left on and shots of her and Peeta at the Capitol party the night before filled the screen. She had to wonder if the people across the nation were getting sick of the Star Crossed Lovers. She knew she was getting sick of them watching their every little move.

As she turned to leave the room a loud beeping noise came from the television. She looked over her shoulder at it and saw something she knew her eyes weren't supposed to be privy to. "UPDATE ON DISTRICT 8" was flashing across the bottom of the screen. She instinctively moved closer to it.

An announcer appeared and began speaking, "Conditions are worsening here in District Eight and a Level Three alert has been issued. Additional forces are being called in and all textile production has ceased."

Katniss took a step back when they cut to the scene in the District Eight Town Square. There was a mob of people wearing rags over their faces to hide their identities, screaming in anger, throwing bricks...rocks, at Peacekeepers. There was fighting going on everywhere. People were being killed. The buildings that had been standing only a week ago, were now burning in the background and from the rooftops that were still standing, the Capitol's symbols were

no longer hanging. In its place were large banners with pictures of...  
"My God! That's us! That's me and Peeta!"

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 8, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Seven: The Whipping Post**

**Hello one and all! I've been busy at work! Writing. Writing. Writing. I do hope you enjoy this chapter and I want to thank you all for reading and reviewing. God bless my betas! S and A for all of their hard work. They put in a lot of time and effort for me and I want them to know I appreciate all of it! Thanks! What do you say we go ahead and read the next chapter of...**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Peeta was practically racing to get to the woods. He was taking a huge risk, but Effie was covering for him and keeping the camera

crews busy with Katniss and at the mayor's house. Portia had sent his prep team there as well, telling them that Cinna needed their help with a few things and that she would be getting Peeta ready at his home in Victor's Village so he could make sure his paintings were returned with care, which was true, but Peeta wouldn't actually be at his house, just Portia. Meanwhile, Peeta had to get to the woods in the hopes that he could get to Gale. Since he was Katniss' "cousin" he was let off of work early to go to the dinner at the mayor's house. Peeta had made sure that Effie had arranged it so he could get a few minutes alone with Katniss' friend knowing Gale wouldn't waste the few spare hours he had by sitting at home. He'd be hunting...providing for his family.

Peeta was wearing some of his older clothes, the stuff he owned before he won the Games, which actually worked as a pretty good disguise now. He blended in with everyone else in the district instead of looking like the victor that he was. No one paid any attention to him as he walked the streets of District Twelve. Especially with the wool cap pulled over his blond hair. He ducked under the fence and ran through the forest heading straight for the spot where he and Katniss used to meet. He didn't think Gale would be there, but that was as good a starting point as any. From there he headed towards the hole in the fence by the Hob. Katniss said that was usually the area that she and Gale hunted. Peeta listened carefully, stopping every few yards, calling out his name, but not too loudly, "Gale! Gale!" though he never got a response. When he was about to turn around and head back to Victor's Village a hand shot out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing out here? Don't you have some fancy thing at the mayor's house tonight?" Gale asked him.

"Geez! You scared the crap out of me," Peeta had his hand over his rapidly beating heart. For a brief second he thought, 'He would've killed Cato...all of us, for sure in the arena.' "I didn't hear you."

"Well, I heard you. Hell, I think the entire district heard you. You were scaring away everything in your path." Gale started to walk away.

"Katniss was right. You can't hunt worth a damn."

"Yeah, I know. I've got lead in my feet...literally." Peeta followed him.

"Listen, I don't have much time and we've got to talk."

"I've got nothing to say to you, Peeta."

"Gale, this is serious." Peeta stood still. "It's a matter of life and death."

Gale turned to face him. "With you, it usually is." Gale walked back to Peeta. "Let me guess, your proposal pissed off Snow, now he's going to kill...everyone?"

Peeta let out an exasperated sigh and said, "I don't have time for games. Are you going to listen or not?"

"Fine. What do you have to say?" Gale said in a clipped tone.

Peeta looked around and said, "Let's walk."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Peeta. Say what you've got to say."

Peeta got closer to Gale and said, "You know...whenever Katniss and I came out here, I always got the creeps...all the birds in these trees watching me...they kind of freak me out." He squinted his eyes at Gale and then arched his brow like he was saying, get it?



Gale listened to the surrounding noises, there were no birds, it was winter and they didn't really care for the cold. Peeta was smart enough to realize that. "Fine, let's take a walk. Lead the way."

Peeta headed off into the woods until he reached the point where he knew the Capitol had no cameras or listening devices. "We're safe here," he told Gale.

"We weren't back there?" Gale asked him.

"No. There are recorders by the entrances next to Katniss' old house and the one by the Hob."

This was news to Gale. "You mean they know I come out to the woods to hunt?"

"Yeah, but I don't think they really care about your poaching right now, Gale."

Gale gave him a curious look and said, "Then what do they care about, because I have a feeling I'm not going to like what you're about to say."

Peeta didn't know where to start. He and Gale didn't have a very good track record. Before Peeta brought up anything they needed to clear the air. "First let's get a few things out in the open." Peeta paused. "I'm not going to apologize for Katniss and I or our getting married. The way I see it, we both had our chance with her and she chose me."

"You've got a lot of nerve bringing me out here just so you can..."

"That's not what I'm doing, Gale." Peeta interrupted him. "Just listen to me." Peeta finished what he was saying. "Katniss chose me, Gale."

Not because I'm any better than you or because you didn't make a move, because I know you did..."

"She told you about that?" Gale couldn't believe Katniss told him about their kiss.

"Yeah, she told me. But that doesn't matter anymore. The fact is...Katniss and I...some people are just meant to be together and that's us. That's me and Katniss. Now I don't expect you to understand my way of thinking or believe in it or anything like that, but I do expect you to respect it."

"You're asking me to keep away from Katniss?"

"No. I'm telling you, not to...cross any lines with Katniss. I wouldn't presume to ask you to stay away from her. That's not my choice to make. That's hers." Peeta said earnestly. "I don't think for a minute that you would consider being my friend as well so..."

"That'll never happen." Gale said under his breath.

"Like I said, I didn't think you'd consider a friendship with me, but I can respect your friendship with her and I won't come between that. I just wanted you to know that."

Gale just stared at Peeta like he had a screw loose. "Is that why you're out here? To tell me I can be friends with Katniss?"

"No. I just thought it would be wise to set some things straight first," Peeta told him. 'Now,' Peeta thought, 'comes the hard part.'

"Gale...I'm here because I need your help."

"You need *my* help?" Gale let out a burst of laughter. "Why the hell would I help you?"

"Because you love Katniss..." Peeta saw a twinge of pink climb up Gale's cheeks. "...and because you hate the Capitol." Then he watched as Gale's face turned to a red hot flame. "If we had to run...could you help?"

"Run?" Gale's face distorted. "Where to?"

"The woods?"

"Thought you said there were cameras?" Gale asked.

"There are other entrances, right?"

"Yeah, but..." Gale shook his head out and said, "Wait...why? Why do you need to run?"

"I'm not saying we need to. I'm asking you...if we *had* to...could you...would you help?" Peeta didn't want to beg him, but he was ready to. He just couldn't leave Gale behind. Katniss would never forgive him.

"Who is we?" Gale wondered.

"All of us. Your family...my girls...Haymitch," Peeta answered.

"What about your family? Would they be coming too?"

Peeta had thought long and hard about this while Katniss slept last night. He wanted to bring his dad and his brothers, but his mother...as much as it killed him, he just didn't think he could trust her. "God, forgive me. I really think my mother would turn us in. I don't want to leave my dad and brothers though." Peeta began to pace. "I don't know...I honestly don't know. I know if it were up to my dad he'd tell me to go without them. He'd do anything to protect Katniss' mom. He's never gotten over that woman."

Gale had no clue what Peeta was talking about, but he really didn't care. If they were going to be taking off into the woods, he'd rather not be bringing Peeta's family along for the trip. "You want to tell me why we need to leave."

"We don't!" Peeta knew he'd have to go into more details and time was running out. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I'm just...I'm running out of time."

"Then I suggest you talk fast." Gale crossed his arms and said, "I'm listening."

"I'm going to tell you some things and you're going to need to just shut up and listen." Peeta stood in front of Gale. "No questions. No comments. Just shut up and listen. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yup." Gale clamped his mouth shut and waved a palm in front of Peeta as if inviting him to speak.

"Right now there's an uprising going on in District Eight." Peeta could see Gale opening his mouth to say something, so he lifted his hand to keep him silent and said, "Shut up!" Peeta continued. "It started when I proposed to Katniss. They had a test run when we were visiting during the Victory Tour." Peeta rambled on about the rebellion. How people around the nation were gathering together to fight for their right to be free. Then he explained about Snow's plans for Peeta and bringing him to the Capitol and how splitting he and Katniss apart would be detrimental to the face of the rebellion and President Snow knew that. "So you see...if he tries to move me to the Capitol, we're going to have to run. Leave District Twelve for good."

"No! Let him take you! You'll survive! You can still make a difference! Hell, Peeta we can all make a difference." Gale began walking in a

little circle. "There's been talk in the mines about rebelling. People are sick of the conditions."

"We know. There's talk in the Hob too." Peeta told him. "There's talk everywhere, Gale. The problem is...everyone is full of talk, but not many are willing to take action."

"Well I am!" Gale stood in front of him. "And so is Katniss. I know she is."

"No, she's not." Peeta said quietly. "She wants nothing to do with it."

"That's a load of shit," Gale didn't believe that for one minute.

"No, Gale. Katniss..." Peeta let out a breath. "You don't understand. You haven't been through what we have...seen what we've seen."

"Oh, like you've lived such a hard life? You're from town, Peeta." Gale said it as though being from town was like being from the Capitol.

"Are you under some sort of impression that my life was easy? That I didn't go to bed at night with a rumbling stomach? Or freeze during the winters like everyone else in our district? That I was oblivious to the pain from the burns...bruises...fractured bones at the hands of my own mother? That I didn't have my name put in that damn reaping bowl with everyone else and have to stand in that square just like you? Granted my name might not have been in there forty-two times, Gale, it was only in there five times, but it only needed to get picked once. Once! So don't stand there and make presumptions about my life because you have no clue what I've been through. No idea what it was like being inside of that arena and then traveling this country staring at those families...looking in the faces of the mothers and fathers of the kids you've murdered..."

Gale put a hand on Peeta's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry." Peeta had faced the arena. Every child in the district's greatest fear. He hadn't been exempt from anything simply because he was from town. Under normal circumstances, town kids died before the kids from the Seam because they had no clue how to survive off of their wits...no clue how to be as hungry as the kids from the Seam, but Peeta did. Gale was sure his mother's abuse had something to do with that. He had heard Peeta tell Katniss about the day he gave her the bread, the whole country had, and the beating he took from his mother for doing it. Gale remembered how abhorred he had been at the woman's treatment of her son and the way the rest of the district just seemed to look past it as though it were no big deal. Gale had suddenly realized that he was no better than everyone else and he was ashamed of himself. He looked down at his feet and said, "I'm really sorry, Peeta."

"Gale, Katniss and I went through hell together and it just keeps getting worse and worse. I tried to explain to her about the rebellion. I did, but she didn't want to hear it. She couldn't." Peeta told him about District Eleven. The fence, the explosives that prevented people from going in and out, the Peacekeepers and the actual events that took place during the tour. "She blames our actions in the arena for that and in a way she's right. There was talk about uprisings before we went into the arena, but what we did in there during the Games..." Peeta looked away for a moment then back at him. "We started a fire that's burning out of control right now."

"Then it's your responsibility to keep that flame going," Gale had to try to help Peeta understand how important this opportunity was for all of them. "And you've got to get Katniss to see that."

"I've tried, but she can't see it, Gale."

"You've got to make her see it, Peeta. You of all people can do that. I've seen the way you manipulate people round to your way of thinking. You can..."

"I won't *manipulate* Katniss into anything." Peeta refused. "Too many people have been running our lives for us...making up our minds for us...telling us whether or not we can be together...where we can live...if we can *live* at all." Peeta started to walk back and forth. "No. If Katniss wants to be a part of this, she's got to come to this decision on her own. I won't be the deciding factor in it. I've given her the basic information...I was going to tell her more but then she just..." He looked at Gale, drew his brows together and frowned. "...I could see something inside of her crack...it was like the more I told her, the more I was chipping away pieces of her heart." Peeta hated to admit it out loud but he had to. "That girl we both knew is slowly fading away. A big piece of her died in that arena when Rue was killed and with each passing day she's getting worse and worse. For the life of me, Gale...I don't know how to get her back. She's hurting...she's scared and frankly so am I. I'm scared for her. Scared of what Snow might do to her if he gets his hands on her."

"You think he'll kill her?"

"Killing her would make her a martyr. He wouldn't dare do that. He'd just make the people of this country fight harder. No...Snow would do something much worse than actually kill Katniss." Peeta paused and took a deep breath. "He'd move me to the Capitol and then murder her...spirit."

Gale rolled his eyes and said, "You really think by moving you away from her he'd murder her spirit? She'd survive, Peeta. She lost her father and she survived."

"Gale, he'd bring her out there and..."

"Katniss is a lot tougher than you're giving her credit for. Even if you had to move. From the way you're making it sound...she'd still get to see you. How would that kill her spir..."

"He'd sell her!" Peeta screamed out. "He'd sell her body to highest bidder!"

Gale just stood there with a slack jawed expression on his face. He couldn't comprehend what Peeta was saying. "He'd do something like *that*?" Gale thought of his president as many things, but a pimp had never been one of them.

"That's what he does, Gale." Peeta said to him. "He sells the victors to the residents of the Capitol. He whores them out and if they don't play along, they pay dearly." Peeta placed a hand on his shoulder. "But he'd make her do it. He'd drug her if he had to and let those men..." He couldn't even say it out loud the thought was so repugnant.

The woods were hauntingly still until Gale broke the silence. "What do you need me to do?" He asked not wanting to believe Peeta's accusations, but knowing they were true.

"Prepare. Hide things in the woods. Far out here...away from the surveillance. Start bringing things here for our survival. If we have to run, then at least we'll be ready for it."

Gale nodded absently. "I'll have to use the entrance by my house. It's dangerous...there's no cover, but...I can go in when it's dark."

"We'll be needing some warm gear. Clothes and stuff," Peeta said to him. "I've got tons of things and I know I can get our stylists to send me some more. I can order stuff and have Effie send it."



"No!" Gale turned to him with hatred in his eyes. "I don't want anything from the Capitol! Not one damn thing!"

"Neither do I," Peeta tried to calm Gale down. "But I'm not going to let pride get in the way of our survival. I'd rather Posy stay warm in a coat provided by the Capitol than freeze to death running from them." He looked Gale in the eye. "You're going to have to set your ego aside here, Gale and think of the big picture. If we take off, we need to be smart about it."

There was too much information running through Gale's mind. This was the moment he had been waiting for his entire life. People were standing together and fighting against the Capitol all because of Katniss...Katniss and... 'Peeta Mellark,' he thought to himself. 'Freaking Peeta Mellark. The baker's son. Yeah, the baker's son who wants to run.' Gale almost glared at Peeta feeling as though he had been manipulated by his words like so many others had been during the Games and said, "I'm not running. You do what you want, but I'm staying here. I'm fighting for what's right." He started to turn and walk away, but thought better of it and pushed a finger into Peeta's chest. "And you should too! Think of all those families that don't have the woods to run into. All those families that don't have the advantages that you do. What about them?"

"WHAT ABOUT KATNISS!" Peeta grabbed Gale by the collar and shook him then pushed him away. "Can you live with the thought of her being raped by men like Snow? Because I can't! I can't, Gale!"

No, Gale didn't want that to happen to Katniss, but he knew he couldn't run away either. There was only one conclusion Gale could come to. "Look, I'll help you to prepare...just in case. I can come out here...put some stuff in hiding for you. Hell, I might need you guys to take my family with you...I don't know. The one thing I do know is that

I'm not leaving. I can't." Gale swallowed and told him, "Peeta, the last thing I want is for something like that to happen to Catnip. You're right...that would be worse than killing her. So, if you have to run...I'll do everything in my power to help you get as far away from Snow as possible."

"They'll try to beat information out of you, Gale. Try to find out where we've gone." Peeta worried.

"Let them try," Gale squared his shoulders.

Peeta let out a sigh of relief, or something close to it, and said, "If it were only me...I'd fight. The things we saw on the Victory Tour." Peeta turned to face Gale head on. "You have no clue how easy we've got it here. You might think our life is hard, but it's nothing compared to some of the other districts."

"Then stay, Peeta. Fight." Gale tried to plea with him.

"If I did, Katniss would too whether or not she wanted to. She'd never leave me and as much as it pains me to say this...I'll leave here...I'd even leave my family behind to save her. I can't let him...I can't allow Snow to get to her. I just can't and I'll do anything in my power to keep her safe even if that means running away."

Gale nodded his head in understanding. "How will I know what's going on?"

"You go to town all the time. Stop by my place in the village and we can..."

"Katniss will know something's up if you and I suddenly become chums, Peeta," Gale said. "She's not an idiot."

"You make trades all the time, Gale." Peeta told him. "And she knows rabbit's my favorite thing to eat."

"You think she won't question me selling you game when she could bring it to you for free?" Gale quirked a brow at him.

Peeta started walking back towards the fence. "As far as Katniss is concerned, we've got one thing in common...her. She'll probably look at it as us trying to be cordial now that she and I are engaged." When they got to the fence Peeta reached into his coat and pulled out a pair of brand new gloves that looked like they came from the Capitol and handed them to Gale. He was reluctant to accept them. "Pride does no one any good when it comes to survival." Gale just stood there staring at them. "Leave them in the woods so you can use them to hunt." Gale still didn't budge. Peeta let out a breath. "I'll make you a trade. I'll take a rabbit for them." Gale started going through his game bag. "Bring it on by tomorrow afternoon." Peeta slapped the gloves into Gale's hands. "I'll see you at the dinner tonight...and Gale...there'll be cameras so..."

"Yeah. I'm not a complete idiot, Peeta." Gale felt the gloves and slipped one over his hand. "Thanks for the gloves."

"Thanks for the rabbit," Peeta peered through the fence and took off the second the coast was clear. He had less than an hour to make it back to his house and get ready for the publicity photos they would be shooting at the mayor's house.

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The sight of her and Peeta's faces in profile, on the giant banners, staring at one another and her gold mockingjay pin in the center of it,

caused Katniss to move closer to the screen. She looked at the signs people were holding...waving above their heads. There were pictures of President Snow with bloody crosses covering his face, like the X Peeta drew over Cato's hand in the arena, images of her mockingjay were plastered all over...everything and then there were her and Peeta...their faces were everywhere. Miniature banners like the large one that hung on the buildings above and then individual ones. Katniss standing with her bow and arrow, aiming at the Career's supplies. A close up of Peeta with that look in his eyes that Katniss recognized from the Cornucopia right before he rushed at Cato and then there was the image of them with the berries. When she saw the first picture of her and Peeta with the berries she had to catch her breath. Whenever she thought back to that moment, all she could remember was not wanting to leave the arena without Peeta. She'd rather die than live without him. But the expressions they had on their faces... Katniss hadn't even realized that they had looked up at her hand when she lifted the berries in the air, but they must've because there was a picture of them doing so. She was staring right at it. The defiant look in their eyes was sending a message out loud and clear. "The Capitol doesn't own us. We can die as we see fit." She began backing out of the room. Her eyes never leaving the screen. When she stepped into the hallway she made sure to leave the door to the study just as she found it, so as not to raise any suspicion. She needed to find Peeta and quickly.

Katniss walked towards the staircase and heard a voice calling to her, "Looking for Madge?" The mayor asked.

'Stay calm,' she thought to herself. 'Stay calm.' "Yes," she put on a brilliant smile. "I wanted to show her my dress." Katniss gave him a quick turn so he could admire her. It was totally unlike her, but perfectly in character with the Star Crossed Lover.

"Well, you know where to find her." The loud beeping started to echo from his study and he lost all appreciation for her dress. "Excuse me," Katniss could read the solemn expression all over his face as he walked into his study and shut the door behind him.

She stood there wondering what to do. Finding Peeta seemed like the logical thing, but she couldn't talk to him here. There were too many cameras...too many people watching their every move. Composure felt just out of reach, but she aimed for it nonetheless. There were so many things she had to try and make sense of. Once she was certain she wasn't going to crawl out of her skin, she headed for Madge's room.

Her friend sat at a vanity, brushing out her wavy, blond hair in front of her mirror. "Look at you!" She turned around when she noticed Katniss' reflection. "Like you came right off the streets of the Capitol."

Katniss trailed her fingers around the circular brooch that adorned her dress. "Even my pin now. Mockingjays are all the rage in the Capitol, thanks to you. Are you sure you don't want this back?" One of the things Katniss had noticed about the images that the rebels were waving was her district token. It was on each of *her* pictures, but not Peeta's.

"Don't be silly. I gave that to you as a gift." Madge said, as she tied her hair back in a gold ribbon.

Katniss stood at the edge of Madge's dressing table and asked as nonchalantly as possible. "Where did you get it from anyway?"

Madge looked up at her and said softly, "You mean you..." she looked over her shoulder at her open bedroom door and asked. "Katniss, you don't know?" Katniss shook her head. "Madge stood up and walked to her door, looked out both ways and shut it. She sat on the edge of her

bed and patted the spot next to her for Katniss to join her. "I thought for certain that..." she stopped her sentence and said. "It doesn't matter." Katniss had a feeling she was about to hear something...something very important.

Katniss knew where mockingjays had originated from. The jabberjay was a male Capitol mutation which could repeat entire dialogues and they used that against the rebels during the first war. It wasn't long before the rebellion figured it out, so they used the birds against the Capitol by feeding it false information. Once the Capitol found out, they had left the birds to die, but underestimated their desire to live. Though the birds were now extinct, they had mated with the female mockingbird thus creating a mockingjay.

Katniss couldn't help but think that Peeta was very much like a jabberjay. Like them, it was his gift with words the Capitol hoped to use against the rebellion but that had instead, only made it stronger. The jabberjay was something the Capitol couldn't control, 'Just like, Peeta,' Katniss thought to herself. The jabberjay lived on through the mockingjay and Peeta... Katniss' fingers trailed along the winged creature adorned to her chest. 'I'm your mockingjay, Peeta,' she thought to herself. 'If not for you...for the things you said in and out of the arena...I wouldn't exist.'

Madge lowered her voice and began telling Katniss the history of her mockingjay pin. "The pin belonged to my aunt Maysilee. She and my mother were twins."

There were defining moments that were etched into Katniss' memory both large and small that would stay there until the day she died. Whether that would be tomorrow or a hundred years from now, Katniss knew those memories would never fade. They were the ones that shaped her life. Most people would assume that the Games would

consume them, but there were only a handful of things that Katniss could picture clear as day and much of the Games were a muddled mess. Though she had never admitted it out loud to...anyone, she remembered the first day of school. The red, plaid dress she had worn the two braids her hair was styled in. The day her father died in the mines was a complete blank, but not the ceremony at the Justice Building where she was handed a medal alongside of Gale and several other children who lost their parents, that day was a permanent fixture in her memory bank. She could remember the smell of the earth as she collapsed into the mud underneath the apple tree by the bakery and the heat of the bread that Peeta had thrown to her when they were eleven...his black eye and the dandelion she had seen in the schoolyard the next day, when she turned away from his injury, not wanting to face the pain that he went through to prevent her and her family from starvation. The thought of Peeta telling her he loved her and the feeling of his fingers slipping through hers as he left her the morning of the Games. The first time she told him. Their lips moving and forming the words, I love you, saying so much more than the viewing audience would ever know. The death of Rue and Katniss' murder of Marvel. Peeta's proposal, though she had known it was coming, that in no way diminished the value of his words or their meaning. These were the moments that Katniss could see...feel...remember every miniscule detail. 'Today,' Katniss thought to herself. 'Will be one of those days.'

"I didn't know you had an aunt...let alone your mother had a twin." Katniss had barely ever seen Madge's mother. The woman spent most of her time lying in her room suffering from terrible headaches.

"I don't have an aunt...well I do...just not anymore. She died," Madge said, not revealing too much.

"I'm sorry."

Madge paused only briefly to acknowledge Katniss' condolences. "I never met her, but thank you just the same." She continued her story. "My mother and her sister were from town. Their father owned the local grocery market at the time. He was hoping for sons to take over the business, but he got twin girls instead." Madge smiled. "The way my mother tells it, my aunt Maysilee didn't think the fact that she was a girl should stand in her way of anything. She was the smartest in her class...smarter than any boy and she was determined to show their father that she could run the business. So she began tutoring other students after school. They were all from town, because she knew they were the only ones that could afford her services. Most of them didn't have any money, but they could make trades with her. They had goods from their parent's shops. Once she had enough items she deemed valuable, she took them to the black market to sell."

"The Hob?" Katniss hadn't realized it was around back then.

"I don't know what it was called, but my mother told me my aunt had to sneak there and the first time she did she was petrified, but she came home with a little money in her pocket. She hadn't sold everything, not many of the people there trusted her, but she'd sold a few things." Katniss couldn't even imagine someone like Madge walking into the Hob on her own and trying to make trades. They'd probably laugh her out of the place. Madge continued without skipping a beat. "The next day at school a boy came up to her at her locker and asked her what she was doing there. When my aunt explained it to him, he laughed at her and said that if she wanted to go back, he'd be happy to take her." Madge smiled as she glanced down at her hand. "My mom said he was so cocky and self assured that my aunt accepted his offer out of spite. My mother warned her not to go with him though. You see..." Madge looked at Katniss. "...he was from the Seam. But my aunt went anyway. She told my mother she only went the one time, but..."



"She kept going back with him, didn't she?" Katniss asked.

"Yes, but my mother didn't figure it out until she came home wearing the mockingjay pin." Katniss lifted her hand and touched the brooch. "My aunt had already told my grandparents that she had been tutoring and earning her own money, which pleased my grandfather, so when she told them that she bought the pin with her earnings, they didn't question it, but my mother did." Madge looked at the pin Katniss was wearing. "My aunt finally told her about the boy from the Seam. They had been spending time together...sneaking off with the help of her best friend," Madge looked at Katniss and said, "Your mother." The look of shock on Katniss' face must've been apparent to Madge because she let out a little laugh and said, "That's not the half of it. My aunt and her beau used to meet somewhere during their lunch break at school...a certain..." Madge smiled and said, "...it was your oak tree, Katniss."

"You're making this up, Madge."

"No, I'm not." Madge shook her head slowly from side to side. "They were in love with each other and the boy had given her that pin. It was his grandmother's. Her husband gave it to her."

"It looks like an awfully expensive piece of jewelry for someone from the Seam to own," Katniss thought out loud.

"The boy's grandfather wasn't from the Seam. He was from town. He moved to the Seam to be with the girl he loved."

Katniss gripped her pin and tightened her fist around it. For some reason Katniss felt a bond with the women that had worn this pin before her. She was curious about Madge's aunt Maysilee. The girl that had loved a boy from the wrong side of the district and Katniss

needed to know what happened to her. "How did she...how'd she die?"

"She died in the Quell," Madge's expression softened.

"The Quell?" A thought struck Katniss. "You mean the one Haymitch won?"

Madge nodded. "That's why I gave you the pin, Katniss. I thought maybe my aunt could watch over you...keep you safe. My mother didn't tell me that story until after Rue died. I was watching the television with her in her bedroom that night and you were crying so hard. Peeta was so..." Madge looked down and pulled at a loose thread on her bedding. "We were both sure Peeta would be the next one to go and then my mom said... 'Just like Maysilee and Haymitch all over again.'" She placed three fingers against the back of the hand that Katniss held as a protective shield over her pin. "That's why I thought you knew. You see...this pin belonged to *Haymitch's* grandmother. *He* was the one that gave it to my aunt Maysilee."

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Katniss opened up the door to her house and walked in with Peeta in tow. Prim came barreling out from around the corner, still wearing her pretty frock from the dinner. "Why aren't you dressed for bed? It's late?" Katniss gave her sister a smile. Cinna had made her the dress, the material was so soft, Prim felt like she was being hugged by a cloud. It was an ankle length pink dress with long sleeves and a large bow in the back. Portia's handiwork had been the little bits of hand crocheted lace at the edges of the sleeves and collar. The detail that went into it took her breath away.

"I didn't want to take this off," Prim lifted the hem of her dress a little and looked down at it. "Mom said I could wait until you got home before I changed."

"Lucky for me," Peeta smiled at her as he put his coat on the rack and took Katniss' from her shoulders. "Now I get to really appreciate the beauty of the Everdeen girls." He held a hand out to Prim and made her stand next to Katniss. He circled them and did a slow examination with his eyes, taking in every detail. "Yup. This is sure to make a lovely painting."

"Really, Peeta?" Prim asked with excitement in her voice. "You'd paint us like this?"

"I'd paint you any day, Prim." He answered.

Katniss gave Peeta a grin and asked, "Where's mom?"

"Upstairs," Prim answered.

"Can you get her for me? Peeta wants to talk to her," Katniss asked.

Prim ran upstairs to her mother's room and said, "Mom, you need to put some clothes on. Peeta's waiting downstairs for you."

"Peeta?" She looked at Prim with concern in her eyes. "Is everything okay? Did something happen with Katniss?"

"Everything's fine. He just wants to talk to you, so get dressed and come on down," Prim smiled.

Prim went back downstairs and heard Katniss and Peeta talking in the kitchen. She stood to the side and listened from just outside the doorway.

"Tea?" Katniss asked.

"No...yes...um...no...no...maybe..." Peeta stammered.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Peeta. It's just tea. You either want some or you don't."

"It's not the tea...it's..." Peeta lowered his voice down, "I'm nervous."

"About what?" Prim could hear the clinking of plates.

"Asking your mother for your hand in marriage." 'Oh,' Prim thought. 'That's why Peeta wants to talk to mom.'

Katniss let out a tuft of laughter and said, "You're kidding, right?" Prim got a little annoyed with her sister for laughing at Peeta. "Oh my God, Peeta. You're being silly. You've already asked me to marry you. This...this is really just a formality."

"No it's not, Katniss." Peeta's voice was a little shaky. "If she says no, I don't know what I'll do." Prim put her hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

"I do." 'Uh oh,' Prim thought. 'Katniss doesn't sound too happy.' "I'll threaten to..."

"Katniss," Peeta snapped. "Don't you dare make any threats. Understand me? I will not have you forcing me into your mother's life. She's either going to accept me or...or...I'm going to have to win her over." 'That should be easy,' Prim thought to herself.

"We both know you're good at winning over us Everdeen women." Prim could hear the smile in Katniss' voice.

"She won't say no, will she?"

Prim could hear her mother's footsteps coming from behind her so she walked into the kitchen and interrupted their conversation. "Mom's coming."

"Did you two see everyone off?" Their mother asked once she entered the room.

"Yeah, they're gone...and so are the cameras." Katniss handed Prim some empty tea cups that she dutifully placed on the table.

"You two must be relieved to have that over and done with," their mother stated.

"Yes," Prim could see the nervous expression move across Peeta's face as he answered. "Mrs. Everdeen...Prim...would you two mind taking a seat?" Peeta held his hand out motioning towards the chairs. Once they were seated Katniss poured tea into everyone's cups and sat in the seat across from Peeta's. He took a deep breath and Prim thought, 'Here we go.' "Mrs. Everdeen, normally I would've asked you first, but...well things were kind of...uh..." Prim felt really bad for him. She had no clue why he was at such a loss for words, but he seemed exceptionally nervous for some reason. "You see...I...I think it's only fair...no...not fair...uh...proper to ask for permission..." Prim knew that Katniss would hate that he used that word. Fortunately, Peeta quickly tried to cover his tracks. "...maybe permission isn't the right word...maybe I should say get your approval...or your blessing...or...or..."

"Seriously, Peeta!" Katniss flattened her palms against the table. Her sister never did have much patience for people. She could sit in the woods for hours and wait for game, but she couldn't wait ten seconds for a person to get a sentence out. "Just spit it out!"

He snapped his head to hers and said, "I'm trying, Katniss."

"Try harder," She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "By the time you're done I could be an old maid."

Prim bit her lips to keep from laughing. "Leave Peeta alone, Katniss. He's just a little nervous."

"Nervous? He proposed to me in front of the entire nation."

"This is different, Katniss." Peeta gave her a look that said, you aren't helping.

Prim reached across the table and gave Peeta's hand a little pat. "Just take a deep breath and try again, Peeta." She really wanted to help him out.

Peeta followed Prim's instructions. He took a deep breath and glanced at Katniss who was sipping her tea through a devilish grin while staring over the rim of her cup at him. Then Peeta looked at Prim who was beaming at him as though the sun rose and set on him and when he looked at their mother, Prim could tell she was holding in a smile.

"Mrs. Everdeen," Peeta threw up his hands as though giving up.

"Don't ask me why I love your daughter so much." He looked at Katniss and said, "She's a pain in my neck, always fighting with me...constantly has to be right...and moody. My God is she temperamental." Katniss set her cup of tea down and scowled at Peeta.

"She doesn't pick up after herself either," Prim chimed in.

Peeta pointed at Prim as though agreeing with her. "Good point. She's a slob."

"I am not!" Katniss argued.

"You leave your clothes everywhere, Katniss." Peeta turned to her mother and said, "But I do. I love her. I love her so much I'm willing to put up with her mood swings," Peeta gave Katniss a soft and loving smile. "For some twisted reason, I actually find them..." he sighed. "...engaging." He paused and took her hand in his. "I can even deal with the fact that she can't bend over to pick up her own clothes and put them away, but what I can't do," he looked at Katniss' mother. "...is live without her." He turned back to Katniss who was now smiling at him. Prim thought he was doing pretty well considering the mess he was when he started off.

"You sure you want to take me on? Only a crazy person would do something like that. I sound like a handful," Katniss teased him.

"No one ever said I was sane." Peeta answered. He looked at Katniss' mother and said, "Mrs. Everdeen, I really want to marry your daughter...be a part of this family and I'm hoping you'll say it's okay."

Katniss' mother sipped at her tea and placed it quietly down on the saucer. She studied both Peeta and Katniss then said, "Welcome to the family, Peeta."

The sound that came out of Prim's mouth was nothing short of a squeal. She ran around the table and straight into Peeta's arms.

"She used to hug me first," Katniss said dryly.

"You've been replaced," Peeta smiled as he hugged Prim.

"Oh, I still love you, Katniss." She gave her sister a hug. "Even though you gave Peeta a hard time while he was trying to ask mom for your hand." Prim looked at her sister and couldn't help but admire all of the wonderful qualities about her. "I'm really happy you decided to get rid of your stupid, never getting married rule."

Katniss gazed at Peeta. Her words were breathy when she said, "Me too."

"I know it might seem a bit sudden, but Effie and I were going over the calendar and the first Saturday in April looks like a great day...if that's okay with you Mrs. Everdeen?" Peeta asked.

"Peeta, I think we're past the Mrs. Everdeen phase. You can call me by my first name, Evelyn or you can call me mom if you like." Prim's mother suggested. "After all, you are marrying my daughter." She sipped her tea and continued. "Now when you say April, do you mean this year or next?"

Peeta just sat there staring at their mom and Prim wondered what was going on. She wondered why Peeta looked like he was about to cry. "Are you okay, Peeta?" He didn't say anything. "Peeta?"

Katniss stood in front of him. "Hey," she lifted his face to hers. "It's okay." Prim had no clue what was going on and from the look on her mother's face, neither did she.

"Did I say something wrong?" Their mom asked.

"No," Katniss turned to her. "We want to get married right away, mom. We're tired of waiting, so it will be this April."

"That just seems a bit sudden, Katniss." Prim didn't think it was soon enough. She couldn't wait for them to get married.

Katniss walked over to her mom and began whispering in her ear. Prim watched as her mom's eyes filled with panic. Then Katniss stood up and said out loud, "We know better than to take life for granted so...this April." Katniss squeezed their mom's hand.



"Okay, Katniss." Her mother agreed. "April it is." She looked at Prim, who could tell the smile she was getting was forced. "We better start planning for a spring wedding."

"I guess so," Prim looked around at the adults. None of them looked like they should. As far as Prim was concerned, they should've been thrilled with Katniss and Peeta's upcoming nuptials, but her mother looked petrified, Peeta looked like someone had kicked him in the stomach and Katniss appeared to be worried about him.

"I'm going to get out of this dress," Katniss told Peeta. "I'll come over when I'm changed."

"Okay," he walked to their front door and placed a kiss on Katniss' cheek. "See you in a little while."

Prim didn't have a clue what was going on with Katniss, Peeta or her mother, but she was determined to find out. It might take her a day or two to get it out of Peeta, but she'd get him to take her on a walk and she'd worm it out of him one way or another. He wasn't the only one around there that could get people to talk.

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Katniss watched Peeta as he walked to his house and shut her door once he got inside. After the things she had seen at Mayor Undersee's that night, her desire to keep Peeta safe, was just as fierce as when they were in the arena. She took her time changing into her clothes and pulling the multitude of pins out of her hair. The tiny braids that had been woven were a pain to get out of her hair, but she managed it eventually. She scrubbed her face until it was free of make-up, pulled her hair to the side and put it in her trademark braid. She stopped by

her mother's bedroom on her way out to say goodnight. "I'm going to Peeta's for awhile."

Her mother looked at the clock on her bedside table. "It's pretty late, Katniss."

"Mom, don't start. We haven't had a moment to ourselves in..." Katniss had to stop and think. "I can honestly say that we have only had two moments to ourselves in which someone somewhere wasn't keeping tabs on us." 'Ironically,' Katniss thought. 'Both times were on a Capitol train.' "We just want to spend a little time together away from the audience...the cameras."

Her mother nodded and said, "I understand. You two haven't really had a very...traditional relationship."

"Not in the least," Katniss said as she got up to leave. "Don't worry if I don't come home."

"Katniss," her mother said as a warning. "Do you think it's wise, spending the night at his house before you're married?"

"Mom, we don't..." Katniss looked away trying to hide the blush the crept up her cheeks. "Peeta's always been a perfect gentlemen with me, mom."

"Who said it was Peeta I was worried about?" Katniss chose to ignore her mother's comment. She didn't know if her mom was serious or trying to make some sort of lighthearted joke, either way, Katniss was uncomfortable with the entire conversation.

Katniss was about to walk out of her mom's room, but there was still one thing she had to say. "Look, mom...I just wanted to say thanks."

"For what?"

"For telling Peeta he could call you mom." Katniss bit her bottom lip. "I know you probably think it's nothing but to him it's..."

"I know what it means to him, Katniss," her mother interrupted. "That boy's life...the way his mother treated him..." she blew out a breath. "It was...is disgraceful. So, yes. He is welcome to call me mom, and I'm more than happy to treat him as though he were my son."

Katniss ran to her mother, who was sitting at the edge of her bed, and threw her arms around her. "I love you, mom. I really do." It didn't matter how many things her mother had tried to do to make up for the mistakes she had made in the past. Katniss had never completely forgiven her. She sort of understood what her mother had gone through, going through something similar herself after coming home from the Games and not being able to be with Peeta, she felt like she wanted to die. Still, Katniss continued on with her life, perhaps because Peeta was still alive. Had she lost him in the arena, she probably would've been worse than her mother after her father had died. Luckily, she didn't have to face that. Katniss was really trying to put things right with her mom. She told herself she had forgiven her, but up until this moment, she realized that she hadn't. Not completely. What she did...was doing for Peeta, meant more to Katniss than anything her mother had ever tried to do for her.

"I love you too, Katniss." Her mother ran a comforting hand down her head. "Both of you. Peeta's such a good man."

"He is, mom. He really is." Katniss sat on the edge of her mother's bed.

"Katniss..." Her mother paused for what seemed like an eternity. "Have you thought about what comes with marriage?"

"You mean...kids?" Katniss asked. She was not ready for this conversation either. 'It's definitely time to leave for Peeta's house,' she thought to herself.

"Yes."

"We've talked about it. Don't worry, mom. We're not there yet." Katniss stood up.

Her mother followed suit and pulled Katniss' ear to her lips. "I can help come May, when the herbs start to come in, they're not as effective as the roots, but those aren't ready until June." Her mother gave her a sorrowful look.

'That actually wasn't too bad,' Katniss thought. She nodded and said, "Don't wait up."

When she stepped into Peeta's house the scent of cinnamon and brown sugar filled the air. She took off her boots and coat, leaving them by the door and walked into the living room where there was a blazing fire.

"Hey," Peeta called to her from the stairs. He too was dressed in his everyday clothes and had a dishtowel slung over his shoulder. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I just got here." She watched as he went into the kitchen and placed the towel over a tiny rack on the wall. The freshly washed bowls sitting next to his sink and the aroma that filled his house had her asking, "Are you baking something?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd make a crumb cake for morning." He walked slowly towards her.

"How long did it take me to change?"

Peeta shrugged and looked at the clock. "About thirty minutes."

"And you've started a fire, changed your clothes, you're baking a cake and...washed your dishes?" Katniss looked around in disbelief. "Wow, Peeta. You're going to be a really, really good wife."

Peeta started laughing and held her hands in his. "Thanks. I told you I'd be a better housewife than you."

"You weren't kidding." Katniss couldn't help but to be impressed with Peeta's handiwork around his house. "It's funny...ever since I moved into Victor's Village; I've missed my old house back in the Seam. Don't get me wrong...I like living in a mansion...who wouldn't? But...it's not really..." she shrugged a shoulder. "...my house doesn't feel like home." Peeta tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. "But when I walked in here..." she stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "...and I smelt something baking...saw the fire..." she lifted her face to his, "...saw you..." She sighed and tucked her head under his chin. "We've been back in District Twelve for six months, Peeta and this is the first time since getting back from the Games that I actually feel like I've come home."

Peeta kissed the top of her head and said, "I know what you mean." He rested his chin on the top of her hair and let his eyes scan his house. "Is it possible for a mansion to seem cozy?" They both chuckled. Peeta let the silence engulf them for a moment then said what he hadn't at her house. "She told me I could call her mom."

"I know," Katniss ran her hand down his cheek. She could tell how much it had meant to him the second the words left her mother's mouth. "I told you she loved you."

"She...meant it, right?" Peeta wasn't sure if Katniss' mother understood the magnitude the use of the simple three letter word meant to him.

"She did."

"How do you know? She was probably just being polite or something."

Katniss gave him a soft smile and told him, "She told me she was looking forward to having you for a son." She placed a kiss against his cheek and said, "Now it's official. You've got Effie and my mom."

Peeta held onto her and thought about how much he had to lose. There was so much more now than when he went into the arena.

Katniss allowed herself to be held for a minute before letting reality set in. "Peeta, I need to talk to you."

"Me too," he hoped she would be on board with his plan.

"It's really important," She had no clue what to start with. The uprising in Eight or Maysilee's mockingjay pin.

"Yeah, my stuff's pretty important too." Once he got the plan in motion, he had a feeling there would be no going back. If they left District Twelve for the woods, they'd be stuck out there...all of them, with no shelter and only the woods to provide nourishment for them. He would lose this wondrous sense of home he felt with Katniss right now. "I've been waiting for this moment since we left the arena. Right here. Right now."

"To talk to me?" Katniss looked up at him.

"No. To be with you...like this." He ran his hands up and down her spine and let them linger at her waist. "After we came home...we

never had any time like this. The one and only time you came into my house was to help carry some art supplies."

"Oh...I guess so," Katniss gave it some thought. "I suppose I've been waiting for this too...when we were on the train ride home from the arena I thought about it...spending time with you like this. I thought, it's going to feel so good when Peeta and I can finally have some time together. Time where we can just sit back and not have to worry about being..." She didn't want to finish her sentence.

Peeta completed it for her. "Hunted?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," he sighed.

"Peeta? Do you ever feel like being in the Games was actually part of training?"

"What do you mean?"

"While we were in the arena, all we had to worry about were the other tributes and the Gamemakers' occasional twists. Now that we're out of the arena...it's like we're always looking over our shoulder. Like we're always waiting for...something..."

"Like our life is the actual arena."

"Exactly."

"I feel that way all the time, Katniss. The worst part is not knowing who my enemies are. In the arena, we knew, but out here..." he shrugged a shoulder. "...I know who the main enemy is, but there are so many others that fight under him. Who do you protect yourself from? Who's on your side?"

Katniss saw this as a perfect opportunity to talk to him about the events she saw on television. Fortunately Portia had told them before leaving earlier that Peeta's home and one other home in their village, an empty one, was free from surveillance. Hers and Haymitch's were being listening in on twenty-four hours a day. "The residents from District Eight are on our side."

"What?" Peeta pulled away from her. His eyes were wide with wonder. "What do you know?"

"I told you...I needed to tell you something important, but I think we should sit down first." Katniss knew she needed to in order to get out all that she had to say. Peeta led her by the hand to the fire and they sat on the floor in front of it. Katniss explained to him the things she had seen, their images on signs and banners, the fires, the deaths and how the Capitol was bringing in more Peacekeepers to fight the rebels off. "Peeta you should've seen it. All of these people were..." Katniss stood up and began pacing back and forth. "They were fighting the Capitol. Holding up signs with our images on them." She looked down at him and Peeta saw the reflection from the fireplace flickering in her eyes. "Ours! I just wanted to...Oh I don't know what I wanted to do. All I know is Snow was full of crap when he came to us asking us to quiet things down. There's no way we could've put a damper on things. No way on earth. Those people must've been planning that for awhile and long before we ate any damn berries. Maybe we helped them out...gave them a little encouragement, but...God Peeta...imagine that." Her face lit up. "We did that. We helped those people stand up and fight against the Capitol...against Snow."

He stood up and held onto her upper arms, delving into her fiery eyes with his own. "There you are," he said in a low voice. "I've been wondering when you were going to show up."



She gave him a look like he had two heads. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No," he chuckled. "Sit down." He smiled. "It's my turn now." Peeta hadn't told her all that he had wanted on their train ride home from the Capitol, but he was determined to now. Just as they settled comfortably down, the timer went off for his cake. He got up, took it out of the oven and set it on a rack in the middle of his kitchen table to cool. His whole house filled with the aroma of cinnamon and brown sugar. As he walked back to Katniss he saw her sitting there with her eyes closed taking deep breaths in through her nose. "What are you doing?"

"Smelling you." She smiled. She opened her eyes and held out her hand to him. "This is what I used to imagine when I was in the arena. At night, I'd strap myself into a tree and think of you. I knew if I could somehow conjure up the scent of cinnamon in my mind you wouldn't be far behind."

"Yes, cinnamon. The manliest of scents," he smiled as he took his spot next to her.

"Trust me..." she curled herself against him. "Cinnamon on you does wonders for me."

He rested his head against hers and said, "I'm really glad you're here."

"Me too." She placed her hand against his chest and told him, "You were going to tell me something."

"Guess I'll start at the beginning." He took a breath. "The day we were getting crowned as the victors of the Games, Haymitch came to me and said he wanted to take me out..." Peeta told her everything that had happened that day, leaving out the stories the other victors had

told him. "It's their tales to tell, Katniss. I wouldn't feel right betraying them that way. I will tell you that Snow has made them do some...unspeakable things over the years." He went on explaining about the messages the rebellion sent him via his art supplies, the test runs in the districts and the uprising in District Eight that had started when he proposed to Katniss. He finished up with Gale. "He's willing to help us run if we have to. The rebellion doesn't know about it. Hell, I haven't even told Haymitch yet or if we even need to anymore. Effie, Portia and Cinna know, but they're the only ones. I know they'll help us if they have to. Effie's actually going to talk to Plutarch when they..."

"Plutarch." Katniss let out a breath. "I still can't believe he's in on this." She sat up. "Is that why he was so...weird at the party?"

"He was weird?" Peeta asked.

"Yeah. He kept showing me his watch." Katniss leaned back down against his chest.

Peeta held her away from him and looked into her eyes. "Katniss, did he say anything to you? This is important. Think. Really think."

"Um...we talked about the punch...he was the one that fell into the bowl when I shot my arrow at the pig during my private training session...he said he had a meeting with the Gamemakers at midnight. It started at midnight. He kept telling me that and told me to keep it a secret. So," she gave him a wicked grin. "If he asks, I didn't say a thing."

"No, Katniss. It didn't. He had his meeting before the party." Peeta's mind started to race. "Is that all he said?"

"Yeah. Why? Do you think it meant something?"

"It must've," Peeta thought out loud. "Why else would he have said it to you? He knew I was going to bring you up to speed on the rebellion."

"Maybe it means the Games start at midnight," Katniss said.

"I don't know." Peeta took her in his arms again. "We'll have to wait and see if he sends any messages to us."

They sat for a little while, thinking to themselves until Katniss asked, "Peeta? Why didn't you tell me all of this on the train?"

"I couldn't. Not after the way you reacted." He kissed her head. "You seemed so heartbroken; Katniss and I just couldn't hurt you anymore."

"If you had told me, I might've agreed to join the rebels."

"I know that."

"Then you should've said something to me," she said to him.

"Katniss, too many people have been making up your mind for you. If you want to join the rebellion, that has to be your choice. Not something you decide to do because I've guilted you into it."

"Then why did you tell me all of this tonight?"

He tilted her chin up and smiled into her eyes. "Because, my girl's on fire again."

Katniss smiled brilliantly at him and said, "Damn right she is. I'm not sure that I'm ready to be a rebel yet, but..."

"But...you're willing to think about it?"

"I really have no choice, Peeta. All those people were out there...fighting...believing in...us." Katniss still couldn't believe it.

They talked for hours. Katniss told him about her mockingjay pin and Haymitch and Maysilee. They both agreed not to let anyone else in on the pin's origin as it wouldn't be of any use to the rebellion, but it meant a great deal to both Katniss and Peeta and they decided that running was an option, but should be their last alternative.

"I'll have to talk to Gale," Peeta told her. "He's supposed to bring me a rabbit."

"I can't believe you two actually had a civil conversation...and that he was willing to help you."

"He was willing to help *you*. I'm just along for the ride," he grinned. "Want to come with me to town Sunday? I have to see my dad. Cinna and Portia made a few things for my family that I want to drop off to them."

"Do I have to?"

"It would be nice. You are going to be a Mellark, you know? We can tell them about the wedding date."

"Yeah." She glared at Peeta. "But don't expect me to be nice to your mother."

"Why would I expect you to be nice to her? You've never been nice to anyone," he laughed as she gave him a playful elbow in the stomach.

He walked her home, much to her dismay and gave her a long lingering kiss at her front door. She stood there watching him as he

walked to his house and they both waved goodnight, then shut their doors.

They met as planned on Sunday and went to the bakery for a little while where they informed Peeta's family of the wedding date. Peeta's father and brothers were thrilled; his mother questioned the rush of the wedding, staring at Katniss' stomach the entire time, making obvious presumptions with her accusing looks. It took every ounce of self control Katniss had not to punch the woman in the face, not to mention Peeta's arms wrapped around her in a vice like grip, which about looked to anyone else like an affectionate hold. Peeta's mother continued to moan and complain about the wedding date, stating that Peeta had promised to get a new roof put on the bakery when the snow had cleared, but her bellyaching came to a standstill when Thom, one of Gale's coworkers, came to the backdoor of the bakery.

"Peeta," Thom wore a frantic expression. "Heard you were here. Can I see you for a minute?"

"Sure." Peeta stepped outside leaving the door cracked so he could listen and make sure Katniss and his mother didn't get into an argument.

Katniss could hear... "Is someone screaming?" She asked no one in particular and walked to the door that Peeta was now trying to close.

"Katniss, go home!" He ordered her. "Dad, can you walk her?"

Katniss pushed her way past him, trying her best to get outside.

"What's going on out there?"

"Damn it, Katniss! Go home!" Peeta yelled at her as she started to run toward the crowd.

Now Katniss was sure she heard screaming and then there was nothing but the sound of air being split in two. She pushed her way through the group of people.

"Get out of here, girl!" Someone said forcefully to her.

"You trying to get him killed?"

Katniss' eyes flew to Peeta who was on her heels. "Please, Katniss. Don't go in there." He tried to put his hand in front of her to stop her, but she had broken through the crowd and seen her lifelong friend tied to a whipping post, being assaulted by a strange man dressed in a uniform the Head Peacekeeper normally wore. He was obviously an expert at the art of whipping, because Gale's back was a bloody pulp and hammered above him by a single nail was the rabbit Peeta was sure Gale was bringing to him.

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Gale woke up early, it was Sunday...hunting day. He had gone to the dinner at the mayor's house even though he didn't want to. That had been the second time he was forced into attending an event for his "cousin" and missing out on work. He hated the mines, but he hated going to the Capitol functions even more regardless of the food he got to eat.

Thoughts of his talk with Peeta in the woods were still going through his mind. He found it unbelievable that Peeta and Katniss were quickly becoming the face of the nation. Katniss he could see, but Peeta? Gale would be happy to take his place as a fighting rebel if the guy wanted to run off into the woods like a coward. He understood why Peeta wanted to protect Katniss, no one should have to go through

the kind of hell Snow was threatening to put her through, but he had known her for years. The Katniss he knew would be willing to sell her soul for the country's freedom. Then again, Peeta had proven he knew a different side of Katniss than anyone else did and it bugged the hell out of Gale.

As he walked through the woods he checked his snares and found himself constantly looking up at the trees. 'They're watching you,' he thought to himself. 'They know you hunt...that you've been poaching from their land. Yeah, and they haven't done a thing about it.' A cocky grin spread across his face as he collected the game he caught. It had been a good haul that morning.

He would've spent more time in the woods, but the days were getting shorter and it was dangerous being out there after dark not to mention he had a rabbit to deliver to a certain dough boy. He stopped and reminded himself, 'You need to knock that off. He's marrying Katniss and he's trying to do right by her. It doesn't matter what you think of him. Stop calling him dough boy.' He stopped by the Hob and sold almost all of his game, but for one very large, very fat rabbit. If he was going to make a trade for the gloves Peeta gave him, which he had left in the woods with his bow and arrows, he wanted it to be a fair one.

Gale walked through the streets of District Twelve thinking about the rebellion, highly anticipating his arrival in the mines the next morning. If he could get word to some of the other miners about the actions going on across the nation... He'd keep Katniss and Peeta's names out of it, of course, maybe say he overheard some stuff at the mayor's dinner party. As he walked through town on his way to Victor's Village he saw a man he had never seen before, dressed in an immaculate white Peacekeepers uniform and standing in front of the home of the Head Peacekeeper, Cray. Though the Peacekeepers in Twelve

weren't like the ones Peeta had described from the other districts, Gale still didn't want to push his luck as he'd never seen the man before. Gale kept his eyes focused on path in front of him, keeping even strides. He could feel the man's eyes on his back as he walked past him and the hairs on the back of his neck rose when he heard the deep voice call out.

"Hey boy!"

Gale took two more steps, hoping the guard wasn't talking to him, knowing all the while that he was.

"I'm talking to you!" Gale stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around, not making eye contact with the man that was heading straight for him. "What's in the bag?"

'The cameras,' Gale thought to himself. 'They know I went hunting.'

"I asked, what's in the bag? Open the bag, boy! Now!" The Peacekeeper yelled at him from a couple of yards away. A crowd was starting to form. People coming outside from the shops to see what the yelling was about.

'This is it, Gale,' he began a dialogue in his mind. 'This is where you die. Not fighting for your country's freedom, but in the middle of town because of a rabbit. A rabbit you were going to give to dough boy for a pair of freaking Capitol gloves!' He felt his game bag being ripped away from his shoulder. The pressure of the strap being pulled from his neck as the old satchel was snatched from his person. He could hear the people in the crowd starting to murmur behind him. Whispering. Wondering.



"Well. Well. Well. What do we have here?" The Peacekeeper pulled the rabbit out and held it in front of Gale's face. "Poaching off the Capitol's land?"

Gale finally lifted his face to the Peacekeeper's thinking, 'If you're going to die, don't go out like a coward.' "No sir. I found it. I was just going to throw it away so no one got sick from it. Never know what kind of disease it might be carrying." The first blow to his stomach took him by surprise. Gale doubled over and tried to catch his breath, but the butt of something hard caught him in the kidney dropping Gale to his knees. Breathing had suddenly become a luxury for Gale. He fell face first towards the snow, his palms stopping him before landing in the pile of it.

The shiny boots of his abuser appeared before his eyes. Gale could make out the crisp lines of his pants, so unlike the other Peacekeepers, that's when Gale realized why this man seemed so different...why he was standing at the head Peacekeeper's house. He was the Head Peacekeeper. The shiny boots disappeared and Gale was certain that's what he felt press into his back as his face fell into the snow. "Poaching is illegal and as such you've been found guilty and sentenced to punishment!" Even with his face half buried in the snow, Gale could still hear the eager anticipation in the Peacekeeper's voice.

No matter how many times he was hit in the back, Gale refused to stay down. He forced himself up on his hands and knees only to feel himself being kicked in the stomach and the cold of the icy earth hitting him in the face as he collapsed to the ground again. This process seemed to be repeated over and over again until Gale could no longer stand. From the corner of his eye he saw the shiny boots disappear only to reappear a moment later. Gale closed his eyes thinking, 'Get up. Don't lie here and take it. Get up!' Though his mind

willed him to move, his body was unable. He felt his coat being pulled from his frame then his shirt. For a split second he had hoped someone was there to treat his wounds and then he felt the rope being tied around his wrists and he knew his punishment had only just begun. That's when it hit him. 'This isn't about a rabbit. This is about an uprising. Snow's sending a message to Katniss and Peeta and I'm the delivery boy.' He was dragged a few feet across the square, in front of countless curious onlookers, none of which were brave enough to step in, but Gale knew if any of them had been in his position, he wouldn't brave it either. He was dropped at the base of a wooden post and listened as something was being hammered into it. Then his hands, which were bound so tightly, they were losing feeling, were strapped above his head. His body, too weak to stand, from the beating it had received earlier, was limp. His back bare and waiting for the first sting of the leather whip. Gale's teeth clenched as it bit into his icy cold flesh and caused his skin to rip apart. The second lash caused him to scream out, his feet scrambled in a vain attempt to run away. The third...fourth...tenth...fifteenth...he didn't know how many blows there were brought tears, hot salty tears to run down his face and caused mucus to run uncontrollably out of his nose. People were staring...gawking at him. At some point his brain has disconnected from the reality of the situation and he no longer knew what was happening or why. All he knew was that the pain had become blinding. His screams unrecognizable to his own ears. The snow beneath him which had been a dingy white to start with was now a deep and dark red. The beating continued and then someone, Gale didn't know who, stepped in. Gale could barely make out the words. His rescuer's attempts had been useless. He didn't know who it was that had tried to save him, until he saw the body slump to his side and the red hair that was unmistakably Darius. Gale closed his eyes and shrieked, his throat raw from wailing into the winter's air. As the next few lashes tore through his flesh, the last thought that went through his mind was, 'Out

of everyone in the district, the one person to come to your defense was a Peacekeeper.'

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 9, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Eight: Effie's Presents**

**Previously in CF:R - Gale was whipped. Katniss and Peeta came upon them and Katniss' mom (whose name has finally been revealed in this chapter) told Peeta he could call her mom since he was marrying her daughter. Peeta spoke with Gale about running away into the woods with Katniss and Gale agreed to help him.**

**Thank you to my betas S and A for their wonderful ideas, questions (trust me, the questions help me make things clearer) and for correcting my grammar. Please note, if it's wrong in the story, it's not their fault. It means that I'm an idiot and didn't fix**

**the story properly. Thank you readers for you amazing reviews. I cannot tell you how much your words of encouragement mean to me. Now...it's time to find out what happens in...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Haymitch was ready to open up another bottle of the white liquor. About the only things he missed from the Capitol was the endless supply of whiskey always at his fingertips, and Effie. This last realization made him want to drink the entire bottle down in one swallow. The woman was a royal pain in his ass. Constantly harping at him about his alcohol consumption, but just about the best friend he'd had in his entire life. Over the years she had cleaned him up countless times from his own vomit, not calling on Capitol attendants as she easily could've, talking to him as she washed the "effluvia," as she called it, out of his hair and telling him that he could find his way back to a normal life if he'd only allow himself to do so. No one knew that Effie Trinket's compassion was there years before Katniss and Peeta had arrived on the scene, with the exception of Haymitch and he never let on. They had their own unspoken friendship that wouldn't sit well in the eyes of the Capitol. He never told her why he drank and she never asked which was fine with him. She tried to help him be a better mentor over the years, yelled at him...boy did they fight, but in the wee hours of the night, when no one was around, she'd sneak into his quarters to check on him and make sure he was still breathing. She was the closest thing to family he had until Katniss and Peeta entered his world.

Haymitch uncapped the bottle and took a long swallow then answered the pounding at his door. When he saw one of the miners, he didn't know the guy's name, he just knew he was a coal miner from the get up he was wearing and the filth he was covered in, he said, "What?" Haymitch wasn't in the mood for company.

"You need to come to the square."

"I don't need to do shit," Haymitch closed the door, but the man's hand on his door stopped him.

"Ripper told me to fetch you. Said that you might be able to help Gale out."

"Gale?" Haymitch's ears picked up at the sound of Katniss' friend's name. "What about him?"

"I'll explain on the way."

Haymitch grabbed his coat off the hook by his front door and left. As they hurriedly rushed through Victor's Village he was informed of the new Head Peacekeeper and the punishment that was currently being inflicted on Gale. "Go!" Haymitch barked at the man the moment they turned out of the village. "You don't want to be seen with me." The man nodded as Haymitch practically ran the rest of the way into town. He rushed along the edge of the crowd, slowing down once he got there, making sure he took up a leisurely pace until he heard Katniss and Peeta's screaming. 'Shit!' He thought to himself. 'Those two just can't stay the hell out of trouble.'

Haymitch could hear Katniss yelling from somewhere in the square, "Leave him alone!"

"NO!" Peeta's voice echoed through the square.

Katniss had thrown herself in front of Gale and Peeta had tried to get her out of the way of the descending whip, but only his hand made it in front of her. The end of the whip caught both a portion of Katniss' face and the palm of Peeta's hand.

Haymitch could see Katniss automatically reaching for an arrow behind her and finding nothing there, hear her call out Peeta's name as he lifted her and threw her into the crowd. Then Peeta took a stance, standing in front of Gale, willing to take the place of the man Haymitch knew he had spent years envying. Haymitch tried to be heard above the murmurs of the crowd as he forced his way through it, "Hold it!", but he was too far back. Peeta took another lashing and then another, catching the whip purposely with his hand both times, not once making a sound, but gritting his teeth through a clamped jaw. The third one came down just as Haymitch broke through the crowd. He saw the blood spray out from the hand Peeta held in front of him, catching the whip's lash, antagonizing the new Head Peacekeeper.

"Peeta! PEETA!" Katniss was screaming out, ready to run back to him, but Haymitch intervened before the Peacekeeper could bring down the whip once more.

"Hold it!" His words stopped the whip from coming down upon Peeta again. Haymitch could see Darius' unconscious body slumped to the ground in front of Gale. If he wanted to get them all out of there alive, he'd have no choice but to ignore the man. He walked to Katniss and held her chin in his hand, looking at the welt that was forming across her face and her puffy eye. "Excellent. Just great. She's got a photo shoot next week modeling wedding dresses." Haymitch looked at the Peacekeeper. "What am I supposed to tell her stylists?" He walked over to Peeta and saw the look of hatred in the boy's eyes that would've scared the living daylights out of him had he come upon that face in the arena over two decades ago. He picked up the hand that Peeta had used to protect Gale and tried not to cringe at the extent of the boy's injuries, but they were too hard to make out from the blood that was quickly pouring from his wounds. Peeta sucked in a breath between his teeth when Haymitch held his hand. "And this?" Haymitch held it out to the Peacekeeper. "The boy's artwork is the talk of the

Capitol! He's supposed to paint a portrait for their wedding. How the hell am I supposed to explain that he can't even hold a paintbrush?"

Haymitch could tell the Peacekeeper recognized him as the victor of the Quell when he spoke. "They interrupted the punishment of a confessed criminal."

"I don't care if they blew up the blasted Justice Building! Look at her cheek...his hand! What the hell am I supposed to do now? You think she'll be camera ready in a week? That he'll be able to paint?" Haymitch was really laying it on thick.

"That's not my problem." There was a hint of skepticism in the Peacekeeper's voice that said, maybe it was.

"No? Well, it's about to be my friend. The first call I make when I get home is to the Capitol! Find out who authorized you to mess with my victors!

The Peacekeeper pointed at Gale and said, "He was poaching. What business is it of hers, anyway?"

"That's her cousin," Peeta growled. "And I'm her fiancé. So if you want to get to him, expect to go through me."

Haymitch could see a flash of uncertainty in the Peacekeeper's eyes.

"I believe, for a first time offense the required number of lashes has been dispensed, sir. Unless your sentence is death, which we would carry out by firing squad," one of the long time Peacekeepers, a woman named Purnia and a customer of Gale's, said.

"Is that the standard protocol here?" The Head Peacekeeper asked.

"Yes, sir," Purnia answered.

Haymitch stood there thinking, 'They have no clue what the standard protocol is. Normally if someone has a rabbit, Sae cooks it up in a stew and they're buying a bowl of it.'

"Very well." The Head Peacekeeper addressed Katniss. "Get your cousin out of here, then, girl. And if he comes to, remind him that the next time he poaches off the Capitol's land, I'll assemble that firing squad personally."

Haymitch had to give Peeta credit. He didn't flinch when the Head Peacekeeper wiped his hand along the length of the whip, splattering him with Gale, as well as Peeta's own blood. He just stood in front of him, staring the man down as though daring him to try and lift a hand to his fiancé's cousin again. Haymitch didn't think the new Head would try it and if he did, he was sure, Peeta would probably kill the man. Fortunately, the only other Peacekeepers around them were still some of their own and would probably help to bury the body. But the new Head just walked away and was followed by the rest of the Peacekeepers who grabbed Darius' still unconscious form.

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The moment Prim saw Gale's wounds she knew it was why her family had such dismal looks on their faces the night before. It was as though they were predicting something like this. "What do you need, mom?" Prim stood to the side of the apothecary, knowing that her mother would be requiring her help.

"Sterile cloths, iodine, thyme, eucalyptus oil..." her mother began rambling off herbs and oils as she put on a kettle of water to boil.



Prim grabbed the sterile aprons from the cabinet and wrapped one around herself then went to her mother and held the other one out to her. They walked to the sink and both took turns scrubbing their hands all the way up to their elbows with a hard bristled brush and a fresh bar of soap Prim had brought with her. When they were clean she looked at Peeta and asked, "Can you shut that off, please?" Touching the faucet after scrubbing their hands would only contaminate them. That's when Prim noticed Peeta's hand. "Peeta, you've been hurt."

"It's okay, Prim. Attend to Gale. He needs you."

Prim gave her mother a look. They didn't need to speak, their eyes did the talking. "Peeta, you're right handed, aren't you?" Prim asked.

"Don't worry about it."

"Sit down," Prim ordered him.

"We'll need another bowl," she heard her mother say. Prim just examined Peeta's wounds with her eyes. She rolled up his sleeve and heard her mother say it again. "Katniss! Snap out of it! We need help. Get another bowl."

"I...I..." Katniss stammered.

"Katniss?" Prim heard Peeta's voice change. It had been short and clipped when he told her to take care of Gale now it was soft...almost musical. "Look at me...look in my eyes."

"Peeta," Prim could hear her sister's tears through her voice.

"Gale needs your help. Now, you do what your mother asks, okay? Just don't look at him. You keep your eyes focused on mine whenever you need to, okay?"

"Okay," Prim took a quick look at her sister who acquiesced to readily to Peeta's request.

"Did it cut you too?" Prim asked her as she took notice of her face.

"No. It's just swollen."

"Make sure you put some snow on it when you're done helping," Prim told her. "Bowl's in the cupboard." She motioned with her chin.

Katniss was set to work putting water on to boil, getting more bandages and whenever she would start to waiver, Prim would hear Peeta start talking to her.

"Katniss, your sister is a little miracle worker. How come you can't do this stuff?" Prim stared down at Peeta's hand and did her best not to hurt him as she pulled his flesh back together. She saw his pulse pounding in his temple and his teeth clenching together, but he was trying to keep himself calm. "Why don't you find out if your mom needs anything else?" Peeta's wounds weren't as plentiful as Gale's, but they were bad. It was as though the whip had been concentrated in one spot and kept slicing the palm of his hand deeper and deeper. The cut extended up his entire palm and through his middle and index fingers then over the top of his hand like the whip wrapped around it. Prim felt a fierce determination come over her as she went to work on her new brother's tattered flesh. Cleaning the wounds, trying her best to pull the skin together, knowing he should be getting stitches for it and willing to sew him up herself if she had to. She was going to heal Peeta's hand if it was the last thing she did. "I'll be right back."

Prim walked to her mother and quietly said, "Peeta needs to be stitched."

Her mother stopped what she was doing and walked over to Peeta. "Lift your hand to me," she didn't ask, but gently ordered. Prim held it up and showed her mother the area between his fingers which refused to stop bleeding.

"Does that hurt, Peeta?" Prim was touching his fingers, gently pulling them apart to show her mom.

"Not really," he answered. "I don't think it's that bad. You two should be taking care of Gale."

Prim and her mom shared a look. Her mother gave her a nod and Prim got to work. "Katniss, I need some things."

"Okay." Katniss answered flatly. Prim began rattling off a list of items she needed to sew Peeta's flesh back together. When Katniss pulled out the needle she asked, "What are you going to do with this?"

"I need to stitch Peeta's hand," Prim answered.

"Why? Gale got hit more than Peeta did and he doesn't need stitches."

"Because Gale took the brunt of it on a flat muscular surface and Peeta didn't," Prim didn't have time to argue. "Please, Katniss. Just bring those things to me. I'm going to need you to hand them to me so I can sew his fingers back together."

"Wha...what?"

"Katniss," Peeta's voice called out to her. "Hey, come on. I'm going to be fine. Weren't you the one that told me I would've been lucky if Prim had been the one to take care of my leg in the arena?"

"Yes," Katniss sniffed.

"This is nowhere near as bad as that and I let you take care of my leg. I'm lucky it didn't fall right off at the bone," he tried to smile through the pain and Prim had to admire his courage. "So bring Prim what she needs and play nurse for a little while, okay?"

"Okay."

"Don't look at my hand, Katniss," Peeta told her. "You look at me. You look right here," he lifted his good hand and pointed to his eyes.

Prim called out the things she needed to Katniss and did her best to put in tiny little sutures between Peeta's fingers. She was hoping he'd flinch...twinge...something, but he didn't. He just stared at Katniss the entire time. Prim knew this was more than just bravery. There was something else wrong that neither she nor her mother could fix.

"Katniss, go check on mom," Prim said to her. Her sister moved about the room like a puppet.

Prim met Peeta's eyes as she gently separated his fingers in order to apply the mixture of medication her mother mixed up on top of his stitches. She whispered softly to him, "Peeta, you won't be able to use this hand for awhile."

"I know, Prim," he whispered back.

"I don't think you do," Prim leaned in. "You can't use it for anything. No bathing, no brushing your teeth...nothing."

"Yeah," Peeta had a morose expression on his face. "I don't think I'd be able to anyway. I can't feel my fingers."

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"Can you save him?" Katniss asked her mother as she stood by Gale.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. Used to be a lot of whipping before Cray. She's the one we took them to." Haymitch put an arm around her shoulder. "Come on, let her work. We'll get some snow for your face."

"No. I don't want to leave." Katniss ran to Peeta's side. "Are you okay now? Does it feel better?" She watched as Prim finished bandaging his hand. "Is it okay, Prim?"

"I'm fine, Katniss. It'll be good as new in a couple of days." Peeta answered.

"All done," Prim announced. "You need some snow, Katniss."

"I'm not leaving," she declared stubbornly.

"Prim," their mother spoke without looking up. "Take a clean pot and get some fresh snow."

The second Prim was out of earshot Peeta spoke in a whisper to Haymitch, "Tell me this was because of a rabbit." Haymitch could tell he wanted it to be. Peeta could accept the guilt of Gale's beating if it was his own fault, but if it was because of the uprising...if it was because of what he and Katniss did in the arena... He didn't want Katniss to feel responsible for Gale's injuries or his.

Haymitch moved closer to Katniss' mother and said, "This isn't because of a rabbit and I think we all know that."

"Is it because..." Katniss swallowed and whispered so softly she could barely hear herself. "Because of the uprising in Eight?"

Haymitch nodded.

"So, it's started again?" Her mother asked without stopping her nimble fingers from putting Gale's shredded skin back in place.

That was the last they heard from her mother for awhile. Prim came back into their house with Hazelle close behind. Gale's mother took his hand and held it to her lips as Katniss mother and sister went to work on him.

Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch stood in a tight circle in the living room. "Peeta thinks we should run," Katniss whispered to Haymitch.

"Can you blame me?" Peeta stared at his mentor and held up his bandaged hand then pointed a finger to Katniss who was holding an icy compress against her face.

"Don't think it will help any."

"Yeah, I know," Peeta resigned. "What are we going to do, Haymitch?"

Haymitch looked at the pair of them and said, "Don't know about you, but I've got a call to make. I'll be back in a bit." He went home and immediately walked to the phone to dial Effie. He listened as the phone rang and hoped the woman wasn't out doing whatever the hell it was she did when she wasn't spending her time nagging at him.

"Hellooooo," he heard her sing song Capitol accent on the other end of the line.

"Effie," He had to keep it nonchalant. "What's the word?"

"Oh, it's you." He could practically hear her bristle over the phone. "What do you want, Haymitch?" The way she said his name really annoyed the hell out of him. She always went up on the 'mitch part of it.

"Got some news for you about that photo shoot you wanted to set up for next week. We're going to have to put it off. There was a little...incident out here."

"Oh, no. Is it serious?" He could hear the worry in Effie's voice.

"Not for Katniss...Peeta's injuries are a little more...serious."

"Injuries? Is it bad, Haymitch?"

"The kid's playing it off, but I think that's for Katniss' sake."

"Take him to the doctor!" Effie screamed at him over the phone.

"Doctors out here aren't like the ones out there, Effie. He's in the best hands possible right now."

"Well, who is that?" She asked.

"Katniss' mom and sister are taking care of him and Gale."

"Gale? Oh, for heaven's sake, Haymitch! I've barely left them! What the hell have you gotten them into?"

"I haven't gotten them into anything, sweetheart. Gale got caught poaching by the new Head, claimed he found the dead rabbit and wanted to get rid of it so no one would get sick from it, but..."  
Haymitch and Effie both knew better. "Anyway, Katniss got in the way of the guy's whip, took the end across her face and Peeta..."

"Peeta got in the way of Katniss," Effie finished it for him.

"You got it."

"It must be pretty severe then."

"Gale's got it pretty bad, but he's not really our problem, is he, Effie?" Haymitch was trying to let her know she shouldn't show too much emotion.

"No!" She snapped. "Our problem is that damn photo shoot which you're saying I have to put off now?"

"Yeah and that portrait you wanted Peeta to paint...you know...the one of him and Katniss for the wedding?" She had never asked for such a thing, but he was hoping she'd get it.

"Yes, the one of him proposing to her."

"Yeah, that one. Well, Peeta can't paint. His hand is out of commission." And Haymitch didn't know how long it would be that way. He had overheard Peeta telling Prim he couldn't feel his fingers.

"Oh...that's not good."

"Nope. So...we'll have to postpone a few things." Haymitch closed his eyes and sent a silent message to Effie. "Too bad we weren't in the Capitol. All we'd have to do is head to the medical center and the kid would be fixed up in no time."

"Yes...well...Being a victor doesn't give you all the benefits of a Capitol resident." Haymitch grinned as he heard Effie's trite retort. She was very good at playing her role.

"Keep in touch, Effie."

"Please keep me updated so I can reschedule the photo shoot. Tell Katniss Cinna is hard at work on her wedding gown designs."

Haymitch hung up the phone and headed back with the hopes that his long time friend wouldn't let them down.



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Effie made her way through the dark tunnel and into the quiet room to find Cinna and Portia sitting on a couple of chairs with a small folding table in front of them. "We've redecorated," she said in a lighthearted tone.

Cinna looked up at her and smiled. "Plutarch was able to sneak in a few items once the bar emptied out."

"Did you get everything to the train?" Plutarch asked.

"Yes. It went off without a hitch." Effie was exhausted. Being a rebel was a lot more work than what she had expected.

"Effie," Plutarch moved closer to her. "I must speak to you about the items you sent. How did you get them?"

"Well..." Effie didn't see the harm in letting him in on the secret seeing as they shared a much bigger one now. She told them all about the secret stash the escorts had access to.

"And Haymitch has been aware of this?" Portia asked.

"No, of course not." Cinna stood up and offered Effie his chair which she gladly accepted. "The last thing I need is Haymitch getting hooked on something other than alcohol and if he knew I had an unending supply of...well...you can only imagine the trouble I'd be in."

"I'm surprised the escorts don't try to use that to their advantage...give their tributes an edge inside of the arena," Cinna said.

"Oh, they've tried." Effie wanted desperately to kick off her shoes and relax. "Those were usually the years the Gamemakers were ordered to take out a tribute within the first day and the escort mysteriously disappeared right after their tributes did."

"Why...that happened only a few years ago," Plutarch said with surprise in his voice. "I remember that well. We all wondered why we had to get rid of the tributes from District One."

Effie was nodding. "And then Lilith was replaced."

"My heavens," Plutarch exclaimed. "I had no clue that was why."

"You wouldn't. No one knows about the supplies with the exception of the escorts and two of Snow's officials...and the Avox that keeps it stocked, of course, but who is he going to tell?"

"Does Snow know?" Portia asked.

"No." Effie rubbed at a sore spot on her back.

Her three allies looked astonished. "Effie, he must," Portia said. "There's no way he couldn't."

"He doesn't. His officials were adamant about us not letting on. Apparently it started years ago after a few of the tributes had gotten into a bad fight the night before the Games. They were considered the odds on favorites, but their weakened condition caused them to die within a day of the bloodbath and someone from District Three won that year by using...a coil of wire, I believe. Needless to say, the Gamemakers weren't very thrilled with having him as a victor. The following year there was another fight and one of the escorts mentioned it to a friend of hers who was married to an official...he got a hold of what she needed on the sly...one thing led to another and

now we escorts have an unending supply of whatever we need whenever we need it."

"My God," Plutarch shook his head. "This is amazing. We can do so much with this...help so many."

"Yes, but Plutarch...Effie is the only one that can go there. We can't keep risking her life this way," Cinna said cautiously.

"Oh, pish posh." Effie's feet hurt. She couldn't take it anymore. She thought of Katniss hiking up her skirt when she tried to teach her about manners so long ago and remembered when she kicked off her shoes and stormed off to lunch. What Effie wouldn't give for an ounce of that girl's courage. "I'm sick of those escorts going in there and helping themselves to whatever they want simply to help keep them looking young or passing out whatever they see fit to their friends." Effie looked down at her feet and thought, 'To hell with it.' She kicked her shoes off. "What do you need?"

Portia smiled at the woman and said, "Cinna, get your sketchpad and we can make a list."

He bent down next to her and flipped open the pages. "Oh, my, Cinna. That's lovely." Effie stopped him from turning the page when she saw a wedding dress he had sketched.

"Thank you. I think that's the dress Peeta would really like to see Katniss in, but...it wouldn't do for a Capitol wedding." He flipped past a few more and said, "This one is...I think is...more to the Capitol's taste."

"No, show her the one with the pearls," Portia chimed in as Plutarch came over to take a peek.

"Mmmm, that's very nice, but...I think Katniss would prefer something a little more simple," Effie smiled.

"Forget Katniss. I love the pearls." Plutarch said.

They chuckled at him and Portia said, "I'm a fan of the one with the lace back, but I think it's a little too...much for Katniss."

Cinna sighed. "My problem is...I can't decide which one I like the best. I just keep sketching more and more dresses."

"We should just vote on them." Effie was beat and the sigh in her voice said nothing to the contrary. She rested her head back against the wall. "You two can draw up some designs and lay them out here, then we'll pick out which ones we like the best." She closed her eyes and didn't notice as the three people around her exchanged glances.

"We could do that you know?" Plutarch said. "It would keep them in the public eye...and you two as well." He pointed at Cinna and Portia.

"The more publicity they have, the further out of Snow's grasp they stay..." Portia added. "...you all stay."

"Make it a contest of sorts," Cinna said.

"I can see it now," Plutarch was booming. "All across the nation. Choose what Katniss and Peeta will wear to their wedding!"

"The Capitol," Effie yawned.

"Pardon me?" Plutarch said.

"Snow doesn't want them to be popular in the districts. If you want to sell it to him, you'll have to keep it local," Effie stood up and grabbed

her shoes. "And I need to get some sleep. Cinna, can I get that list from you tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

She bent down and slipped her shoes on. "I don't know where my manners went," she mumbled to herself about taking off her shoes in front of people. She held onto her candle and said, "We need to do something about the lighting in here. Lanterns would be preferable over these or something battery operated. Perhaps...a few more chairs...tables...I have a feeling we'll be using this spot a lot more often. And let's get some supplies in here too. Food...water...emergency first aid kit. You never know when one of us might need to go into hiding."

As she left the room she overheard Plutarch saying, "I'm telling you, that woman needs to be running the rebellion."

Effie had felt appreciated by Plutarch's comment, but that's not why she was a part of this group. Her reasons were miles and miles away. She had to go home and make a call to Haymitch and let him know she had decided to send him a package to pick up his and Peeta's spirits.

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Peeta held the snow pack against Katniss' face as she wiped away Gale's splattered blood from his. She was sitting across his lap, with a furrowed brow and fear plaguing her features.

"Are you in pain?" Her voice has regained a touch of its composure, but Peeta knew it was merely for his benefit.

"I'll be fine." The truth was his hand hurt like hell, but he still had no feeling in either of his fingers. Being hit by the whip felt like he had been sliced with a razor and he had only been struck a few times. He couldn't even fathom what Gale was going through. "How are you?" He lifted the pack he held to her face and peeked at her wound. "That looks like it smarts."

"No, it's nothing." It stung like hell and her eye was swelling closed, but she wasn't going to tell him that. Compared to what he and Gale got, she couldn't complain. "I'm worried about your hand. How are you going to paint? Bake? Shower?"

"That's what I've got you for," he tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Hope you don't mind helping me out."

"I don't mind."

Haymitch walked back into the house and noticed Katniss' mother and sister had almost finished applying salve to Gale's wounds. He headed into the living room and sat next to Katniss and Peeta. "How's he doing?"

"He hasn't moved since we brought him in here," Peeta answered and as if by some unknown force, Gale started to come to.

Katniss jumped to her feet and they followed her to his side. "Gale?"

"Stay back, Katniss," Peeta said. "Your mom's still trying to work." He handed her the snow pack and put his good hand on her shoulder. "Let her finish," he said softly.

Katniss nodded her head and watched as her mother and Prim started to apply a light bandage to her friend's back. His moans brought tears to her eyes and a churning to her belly. Peeta squeezed her shoulder

and placed a kiss against her back. Katniss' hand reached up and gripped his. She needed to feel his strength. It was the only thing that could keep her going. Gale began stirring and her mother and Prim began talking about treating his pain.

"We can mix up some herbs, mom," Prim said.

"Take them out and I'll make up a batch then mix it..."

"No!" Katniss found herself yelling. She knew they had something stronger. They had the kind of medication the doctors used for pain, but they were expensive and her mother only used those when she absolutely had to. According to her mother it was used for the worst kind of pain. "Just give him the medicine!"

"Katniss, the herbs are for inflammation. I'll mix it with sleep syrup and he'll be out." Her mother's voice was calm. Too calm as far as Katniss was concerned.

"Just give him the damn medication! Who are you to decide how much pain he can take?" Katniss screamed.

At the sound of her voice Gale turned his head to her and tried to lift his hand to reach her. The wounds on his back reopened and his bandages, which had been white a moment before, were now red from the blood that began to seep through.

"Take her out of here," her mother ordered Peeta.

"NO!" Katniss screamed as Peeta lifted her with his good arm and tried to carry her into the living room. "NO!"

"Damn it, Katniss!" He bent down and took her over his shoulder. He could feel her fists pounding against him. His hand began bleeding as

he held her in place, but he wasn't going to tell her or her family. He just needed to get her out of there. He walked out the door with her flailing body slung over his shoulder and went to his house. The snow was coming down and he could feel Katniss shaking from the cold...her anger...he didn't know. He wasn't sure how he was going to open his front door until Haymitch's hand shot out from behind him and twisted the knob.

"Need me to come in with you, kid?"

"For a minute. Just help me get her settled." Peeta wasn't sure if he could handle Katniss with one hand.

He took her up to his room and put her on the bed where she started to fight with them. "Let me go! Get off of me!"

"Katniss, please stop this," Peeta was trying to stay calm, but he couldn't get through to her.

"Come on, sweetheart. You're not helping anybody by doing this," Haymitch tried too.

"Get off of me, you son of a bitch!" She screamed at Haymitch.

"Damn it, Katniss! That's enough!" Peeta yelled at the top of his lungs. He turned to Haymitch and said, "Get out! Now!" His mentor held up both hands and walked out closing Peeta's bedroom door behind him leaving a flailing Katniss on the bed. Peeta went to the door and stood in front of it, knowing that she'd make a run for it. He couldn't pin her down with his hand in its current condition, but he could prevent her from leaving. There was no way she'd make it past him.

Katniss needed to get out of there. She had to get back to Gale. Had to force her mother into giving him the stronger medication. Peeta



didn't understand the pain he was in. He had no clue how badly Gale was hurting. Katniss was pounding her fists against Peeta's chest, trying to make him move away from the door, but his hand was gripping the knob and then she saw the streak of red against the white bandage. She felt like a balloon that someone had let all the air out of. Her whole body crumpled to the floor. Peeta knew better than she did how much pain Gale was in, he too was suffering. He had stood in front of the Peacekeeper and taken several lashes himself. Not against a muscular back, but on the tender flesh of his palm. The hand that he used to hold onto his paintbrush and help him through his nightmares. "Peeta," she reached her arms up to him and felt him take her into his. "I'm sorry." She sobbed into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"Shhh," he stroked her head with his good hand, trying to forget the stinging in his right one. "You're upset. It's okay. its okay." he held onto her quaking body as the tears spilled out of her one good eye. "Oh, Katniss," he kissed her cheek. "How did this happen?"

"We said I love you on national television and threatened to eat some berries," she wiped her nose against her sleeve.

"Katniss, I'm not sorry about the berries or that I told you I loved you," he said to her. "What happened today...I mean I knew they were doing things like that...we saw what it was like in the other districts...heard the stories...but..." He took a deep breath and let it out. "...I never thought I'd see something like that happen here. I know that's going on everywhere else in this country...I know every single day people are being whipped for no good reason, but here?"

"I keep thinking about Thresh," Katniss said against his chest. "It would've been Rue if he hadn't taken the blame."

"All because she dropped a basket of fruit." Peeta said in disbelief. "That's no reason to whip someone. Hell, there is no good reason to whip someone."

"No. There isn't," she agreed. Katniss pulled herself away from Peeta and looked into his eyes. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Peeta nodded his head. "Let's get you cleaned up. You're a mess."

Peeta washed her face with a warm cloth, staying away from the area the whip had touched, then they headed back to her house.

The night was long and Gale was suffering terribly. Whatever medications Katniss' mother had given Gale wasn't nearly enough as he continually grit his teeth and cried softly throughout the night. Peeta couldn't take his mind off of Gale's pain, even though he was suffering himself. He could see the guilt in Hazelle's eyes as she left for the night, but she had more children at home and one of them was ill. If Peeta could, he would've gone there and cared for them, but he was useless. Prim had insisted on redressing his hand. He hadn't wanted her to, but she wouldn't take no for an answer and Katniss was clearly upset about seeing the blood on his bandage, so he had finally given in.

"Evelyn?" Haymitch spoke quietly to Katniss' mother. "What more can I do?"

"Go to Peeta's house and pack him a bag. He'll be staying here for awhile," she told him without even asking Peeta if that's what he wanted.

"That's okay," Peeta stood up. "I'll be fine at my house." He didn't know how to tell her, he didn't want to stay in a place where the

Capitol could hear every single thing he said. "I really don't want to impose."

"It's no imposition," she said to him.

"Peeta," Katniss walked up to him. "If you don't want to stay here for awhile, I can stay at your house with you...I can take care of you there."

He smiled softly at her. 'You always know, don't you, Katniss?' He thought to himself. "That would be great. I know I can't paint, but being around my art...it helps."

"I know," she said. "We'll stay the night...I don't want to leave Gale..."

"No. We need to stay here until Gale's ready to go home."

"I'll go get you a bag, kid," Haymitch left.

"You don't mind do you, mom?" Peeta asked trying out the name for size.

"No." She glanced between the two of them. "I can understand you wanting to be around your art."

Peeta walked up to her and placed a kiss against her forehead. "You Everdeen women amaze me." He gave Prim one on the top of her head. "I am the luckiest man in the world." He held his arm out and Katniss walked into it. "Why don't you ladies go to bed and I'll sit up with Gale for awhile." It was almost three in the morning. Twelve hours had passed since all of this began, yet it felt like it happened only a moment ago to Peeta.

"I can sit up with him," Katniss suggested.

"No, Katniss. I'll do it. I can't sleep anyway," Peeta kissed her cheek.  
"You lie on the sofa. If he wakes up, I'll let you know."

Prim and her mother went up to bed leaving Katniss and Peeta alone with Gale who let out the occasional moan. They each took a chair next to Gale and watched over him as he lay across the table in the dimly lit kitchen. They had forgotten about Haymitch until he returned thirty minutes later.

"Where have you been? Raiding my liquor stash?" Peeta asked.

"Do you have one?" Haymitch set down a bag.

"No, just wondering where you've been." Peeta had one, but he wasn't going to tell Haymitch.

"I answered your phone for you, kid. Effie called to check up on you. She's been trying to reach us all night."

"Why didn't she just call here?" Katniss asked.

"She didn't want to interrupt anything," Haymitch motioned with his chin towards Gale.

"So, what did Effie want?" Peeta looked over his shoulder at Haymitch. "Is she upset about the wedding shoot?"

"She wanted to send you a little something to lift your spirits. She knows you can't paint right away, but she thought you might enjoy some new colors...something to look forward to."

That didn't sound like Effie to Peeta or Katniss. Sending Peeta paints, knowing full well that he wouldn't be able to use them, was a tad bit on the callous side. That was something the old Effie would've done. The one they had met on Reaping Day, that never thought before speaking

or acting, but not the woman that risked so much to warn Katniss about the Capitol's anger with their actions in the arena and certainly not the woman that snuck up into a dusty room with them in District Eleven. Peeta lifted a questioning brow and glanced at Katniss.

"Um...that's nice of her," Peeta said with a, I suppose, expression on his face.

"Yeah, kid. Effie's always taken her escort responsibilities seriously." Haymitch gave him a light pat on his back. "Should be here first thing in the morning. Katniss, your gift didn't make the train, but she'll be sending it out soon. See you in the morning. Goodnight."

Katniss and Peeta stood vigil over Gale, watching as he gripped the edge of the kitchen table and moaned through the syrup induced sleep that was provided for him. His eyes fluttered opened several times only to close again. After forty-five minutes of his painful moans, Katniss stood up and walked into the living room. It was hell watching her friend go through this. It brought back too many memories of the arena, but Gale, she knew wouldn't die. He'd just be scarred for life.

"Katniss," Peeta called softly to her. "He's coming to. Where's that medicine your mom mixed up?"

Katniss ran to the kitchen counter and grabbed the bowl of herbs mixed with sleep syrup, visions of berries ran through her head. *"It's sugar berries...haven't you ever had them before, Peeta?"* She could see herself force feeding the tainted fruit to him in the cave and shook her head to free herself from the wretched thoughts.

Peeta peered down into Gale's eyes. "Katniss is getting something to help you sleep."

"Katniss? Is she..." Gale's words were barely audible.

"She's fine," Peeta assured him. "Don't worry about her."

Katniss sat at Gale's side with a spoon and bowl in her hand. "This will help." She stirred the concoction up for good measure before feeding him every last morsel.

Gale tried his voice out again after a minute, "I thought you two would be gone by now after..."

Peeta glanced over at Katniss then back at Gale. "We're not going anywhere."

"You're not?" Gale asked.

"Nope," Katniss leaned closer in and said quietly. "We're staying here and causing all kinds of trouble."

Gale's eyelids were drooping from the sleep syrup. He barely managed a smile as he said, "Me too."

Peeta watched as the medication pulled Gale under and hoped it would be enough to ease his pain.

Katniss placed the spoon in the empty bowl and wished she had left some medication for Peeta who was obviously hiding the anguish his injury had caused him, for her benefit.

A couple of hours later Haymitch arrived wearing a smile and carrying a couple of packages from Effie Trinket.

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Effie had gotten home almost eight hours earlier. She had tried to call Haymitch as well at Peeta's houses, but no one answered. She was tempted to call Katniss' home, but Haymitch had said her mother and Prim had been taking care of Peeta and Gale. Effie was certain that a phone call there would've been a distraction they couldn't afford. Instead she regularly tried Haymitch and Peeta's homes constantly getting no answers. She had dozed off for about an hour and regretted it the moment she woke up. It was imperative that she let Haymitch know about the package she had sent. She thought back to earlier in the day and hoped she had pulled off, what she thought, was a fool proof plan.

*"I don't understand how they even found out about him poaching," Portia said.*

*"They put a couple of cameras in the woods when they thought Katniss might win the Games," Plutarch told them. "They wanted to keep an eye on her when she got back home."*

*"Are the feeds sent back here?" Cinna asked.*

*"Not initially. They go directly to the Head Peacekeeper's home. He or she is provided with a surveillance room. Not all of the districts utilize them, but District Twelve was informed that they needed to stay on top of theirs. When the Capitol was continually sent back feeds that showed no hunting after Katniss returned home... I'm guessing someone got suspicious because suddenly we were receiving video of Katniss and Gale hunting, Katniss and Peeta in the woods..."*

*"Katniss and Peeta in the woods?" Portia interrupted. "You mean...they didn't stay apart?" She smiled.*

*"Did you think they would?" Cinna asked.*

*"Enough! Who cares what they did! I don't! I don't give one rat's patootie about the goings on in the woods of District Twelve! All I care about is what we're going to do now! We need to get something to them! I can't stand here and not help! Haymitch was practically begging me to help Peeta!" Effie paced around the dark room the rebels used to hold their secret meetings at the Capitol.*

*"What are we supposed to do, Effie?" Portia asked. "You know we can't send that much medication to them. We can't send any."*

*"How would we even get a hold of it?" Cinna asked.*

*"Oh, that's not a problem," Effie pursed her lips. "I've gotten it before. I can get it again."*

*"You've gotten...medications?" Plutarch asked.*

*"Yes," Effie said as she began pacing.*

*"How?" Plutarch began pestering her. "We've been trying for years to figure out a way to get to the medical bay without being detected. Medicine is the one thing we can't seem to get a hold of no matter..."*

*"Plutarch! Shut up!" Effie continued pacing. "If I can get a little tube of it...not much. I send Peeta art supplies all the time...they won't expect it if he gets that...I'll need a tube of...oh but how will he know which tube..."*

*"Effie, if you could just..."*

*"Plutarch," Cinna put a hand on his shoulder and spoke softly to the man. "Trust me when I say, you don't want to interrupt her right now. Effie's at her best when she thinks aloud."*



*"Oh...okay," Plutarch simply nodded and stood back to watch the escort he had known for years work her magic.*

*"Well, yes...I could do that...if...hmmm...I'd need to...Ah ha!" She slapped her hands together. "I've got it! Now I won't be able to get enough for Gale and if he's miraculously healed..." Effie raised her brows. "Peeta's hand however..." Effie turned her eyes to Portia. "I think we all know that boy's will suffer greatly without the ability to paint or bake. He's already lost a leg and I refuse to let him lose the use of his hand."*

*"Won't they question his recovery as well?" Portia asked.*

*"It's winter. He can wear gloves and by the time spring comes around, he'll be here. If anyone says anything, he can say they fixed it up here."*

*"That's true," Cinna said. "It's cold out there. They never go anywhere unless they're bundled up."*

*"Unfortunately, Katniss will have to keep her injury. Everyone will notice if hers is gone, but we can help Peeta and...perhaps...hmmm...maybe I can...yes...I think I can..." Effie started to pace again. "If I'm going to do this, I need to hurry. The train leaves in..." she lifted up her wrist and looked at the time. "Oh, heavens. I've got less than three hours!" She turned her attention to Cinna. "Can you get me an empty tube of paint? Orange. It must be orange oil based. And it must be unused. Portia," she turned to the other stylist. "Do you have Peeta's art supplies?"*

*"Yes, but the canvases aren't ready yet."*

*"I don't care about the canvases. It's the tubes of paint I'm interested in." Effie turned to Plutarch. "And you," she pointed at the man. "I*

*need whiskey. Three...no...four bottles of it, so I suggest you find Carter and have him raid that bar of his. Make sure two of them are empty, but don't rinse them out." She stared at an unmoving Plutarch. "Well, what are you waiting for? Move! Go! I need it now not tomorrow!"*

*"Effie?" Cinna asked her as Plutarch exited their room to retrieve the bottles of booze. "What's the plan here?"*

*"The plan is for me to take care of our kids and help out their friend. Now this is what I need you two to do and remember...we're on a schedule." She tapped her watch.*

*Effie was standing at the train station wearing, not her traditional wig, but her natural hair pulled back into a tight bun and a Capitol attendant's uniform. Her face was void of any makeup except for the black liner and lips the attendants wore. The crates she was carrying weighed more than she was used to, but she trusted no one with them. One held several tubes of watercolors and one tube of orange oil based paint, something Peeta never used. He would recognize this as strange, but no one else would. They'd just see it as an artist's supplies, when in actuality it held a powerful cream that was orange in color and when applied to Peeta's injuries, would heal them enough so he would once again have use of his hand. He would have faint scars there, but no one would question him if he wore gloves in public like Effie had suggested. It was the same medication she had gotten a hold of the night before he went into the arena. He had mentioned how it resembled orange paint to her and Portia, but smelled like lentil soup and he hated lentil soup. Even the smell of it, turned his stomach.*

*The other crate held four bottles of whiskey. Though the carton was labeled the bottles weren't. Technically it held two bottles of whiskey,*

one bottle of morphling and one bottle of antibiotic. Haymitch would recognize the slightly off color and odor of the antibiotic once he opened it. On the train ride back to District Twelve, after the Games, Haymitch assumed Peeta was drinking shots of whiskey. Peeta told him that he was required to drink antibiotics for another day to prevent infection. Normally the Capitol would just give him an injection and be done with it, but the extent of Peeta's leg injuries, his blood poisoning, having a prosthetic combined with living in District Twelve...the doctors thought it best that they give him something oral to take as a precaution. Haymitch would also recognize the morphling. As a mentor, he was familiar with the addicts that came to the Capitol each year. They would know the extra medication would be for Gale and any future patients that might cross Katniss' mother's table.

Getting the medicines was easy. Effie had known many escorts that had been going into the special medical bay for years to get their tributes supplies. The Careers never followed the rules when it came to training and always fought with one another as well as other tributes. The Capitol couldn't overlook it publicly, but they could privately and had a supply of medicines always at the ready for them. It was left in an area that was no longer monitored by Capitol surveillance. There were no Peacekeepers. In fact, the only people that ever went there were escorts who were trying to hide the fact that their tributes were fighting before the Games, keeping their mentors in a supply of morphling or tapping into it themselves. It was known only to two Capitol officials that this was one of the unspoken perks that came with being an escort. Even Snow himself wasn't privy to the information. The escorts, valuing their lives, knew better than to make mention of it to anyone. They would just magically show up with whatever was needed.

She handed the crates to an attendant, the same man she had yelled at about the train breaking down. Though she had recognized him, he

*had no clue who she was, and walked away. As she headed down the streets of the Capitol for Tigris' shop she hoped that Haymitch would understand her meaning when she called him and told him that she sent him and Peeta a package. In all the years that she knew Haymitch she had never sent him alcohol, so he'd have to know there was a reason for it. 'Please, Haymitch' she thought to herself as she changed into her normal clothes in the back of Tigris' shop. 'Please don't be too enamored with the liquor to miss the hidden meaning.'*

Effie decided to try once more and then she'd have no choice but to lie down. Her eyes refused to stay open. She picked up the phone and dialed Peeta's house thinking, 'Please, be home. Please, be home.'

"What do you need, boy? Pajamas? Toothbrush?" Haymitch asked as a greeting.

"Haymitch?" Effie let out a sigh of relief. "Why are you answering Peeta's phone...in such a crude manner?"

"Effie. Thought you were the boy asking me to pick something up for him." He paused. "Why are you calling in the middle of the night?"

"Oh...well..." Effie hadn't thought about how rude her own actions would be perceived. "I've decided to send you a care package, Haymitch. It's obvious to me that the three of you need some cheering up. I know Peeta can't paint for a while, but I've sent him some wonderful new paints regardless, to give him something to look forward to. I've even included his favorite color. It's smashing. I'm sure it will cure what ails him. Don't ask me why, I've decided to be kind to you, but I have. You'll find some of your favorite...delicacies in there as well."

"And Katniss?" He asked.

Effie's brows shot up. She hadn't thought about sending Katniss something. "Katniss' item didn't make the train. I'll be giving that attendant a what for come morning. However, I will personally deliver it to the station myself tomorrow and see that it gets sent to her." Effie lifted her fingers to her temple and began rubbing. 'Now you'll have to think of something to send Katniss,' she thought.

"I'll let the kids know. Thanks, Effie."

"An escort's job is never done," she said brusquely and hung up.

Effie let the hot water spray her as she stood in the shower. The pulsating water pounded at her flesh, freeing her muscles of the tension the day had caused. She had to send Katniss a gift, but what? Even her brain felt overworked. Katniss never wanted anything for herself. If Effie had sent her something, she'd probably throw it against a wall and smash it into a million pieces. Effie rolled her head from side to side and rubbed at her neck. What could she send? 'Does it matter, Effie?' She asked herself. 'Just pick up a little trinket and let her smash it to smithereens.'

As the escort prepared for bed she chided herself for forgetting to take off the diamond earrings her mother had given her. She walked to her dressing table and opened the claw foot jewelry case that stood five feet high. She opened the center drawer and lifted up the false bottom to place her favorite pair of earrings in there. Not that she was afraid anyone would break into her home, but it gave her a sense of security knowing they were out of sight when her friends came over to admire her goods. Some of them were a little light in the fingers when they had a too much to drink. Effie's lips pursed. She closed the false bottom and opened it up again. She closed it...then opened it. She went through this process several times before smiling to herself. In

her mind she thought, 'Katniss don't let me down. Make sure you heave your present against a wall.'

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 10, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Nine: Parcel Day**

**When last we were in D12, Gale and Peeta had been whipped. Effie sent some gifts.**

**I have finally started my tumblr page, which is a bit barren at the moment, but there are a few musings up there so feel free to check it out. I would also like to thank those of you who have taken it upon yourselves to promote my stories via your own pages. Thank you so much. I'm flattered. Please remember I do not get paid for writing these stories, I do it for the fun, but your kind words are much appreciated. Thank you to A and S for putting up with my super CRAZY. I can't tell you how many times**

**I've changed this chapter...and the next. They really are remarkable. Now, shall we grab a glass of iced tea and catch up on...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

There was a soft glow shining like a beacon through the darkness that consumed him. Gale's mind was foggy and his body ached. He felt as though there were shards of glass embedded in his back. Through the faint light he could make out her features...Katniss.

"Katniss is getting something to help you sleep," Peeta was next to him.

"Katniss? Is she..." Gale felt like he could barely get the words out.

"She's fine. Don't worry about her."

Katniss reappeared with a bowl of something and began feeding it to Gale. "This will help."

Gale swallowed spoonful after spoonful of the sweet syrup laced with herbs. His eyes roamed back and forth between Peeta and Katniss. He wondered why they hadn't tried to leave yet. Surely something like this would've scared Peeta out of his wits and definitely enough to make a run for it. "I thought you two would be gone by now after..."

Peeta glanced over at Katniss then back at Gale. "We're not going anywhere."

"You're not?" Gale asked.

"Nope," Katniss face was inches away from Gale's. "We're staying here and causing all kinds of trouble."

Gale's eyelids were drooping from the sleep syrup. He barely managed a smile as he said, "Me too."

His eyelids felt like they weighed a ton. Gale blinked slowly, trying to determine how much time had passed since he had fallen asleep. The house was so silent...still. He saw her out of the corner of his eye. Katniss was standing in the kitchen by the sink, filling up a basin. He wanted to reach out to her, but he couldn't move. His limbs were too heavy, so he settled for watching her. He could make out the soft expression on her injured face. She didn't need to tell him how she got the welt across her cheek or the black eye that was forming. It had come from the same place he had gotten his injuries.

He heard her voice speaking softly, "Let me do this for you and then I'll change out of my clothes." She set the basin down and began walking towards the table. Gale wanted to keep his eyes open, but they were too heavy so he closed them and just let the sound of her voice ease his weary soul. "You can't blame yourself for this. Don't try and tell me you're not doing that very thing right now, because I know you better than that. We both know this wasn't because of a stupid rabbit...this was a message." Gale could hear her getting closer to him. He was sure she was sitting next to him. "When I saw you get hit today...I was so scared yet...at the same time...I was so proud. You are the most selfless human being I have ever known. You willingly put yourself in danger to protect the people you love...the people I love." Gale's eyelids fluttered open. Something inside of him knew she wasn't speaking to him, but to...

Peeta was sitting on a chair with Katniss in his lap. She was running her hand down his cheek and pressing soft kisses against his forehead. "Katniss, this is my fault. If Gale hadn't been coming to my house...if I hadn't asked him..."



"Stop it, Peeta," Katniss placed a kiss against his lips to halt his words. "If he hadn't been coming to you, then he would've been going to someone else on another day. A day when we may not have been in town. When you weren't there to help him."

Gale didn't understand what she was saying. Peeta helped him?

"Yeah, a lot of help I did," Peeta said.

"You did help him. Those last few lashes could've killed him, but you took them yourself. You stood there and just..." Katniss' voice started to crack. Peeta lifted his hand to her head then put it back down and switched to his other hand. Gale's eyes followed the hand that Peeta dropped down to his side and saw the bandage wrapped around it.

"Shhhh." Peeta stroked her head. "Shhhh." He tried to comfort her as she silently cried into his neck. "I thought you were going to help me get cleaned up?"

Gale's eyes were opened in little slits as he watched them. Katniss stood up and led Peeta into the kitchen. She slowly removed his shirt and had to cut the sleeve to make it wider in order to fit it over his bandaged hand. She pulled off his boots, his socks, his pants...and Gale couldn't seem to take his eyes off of them. Peeta just stood there as Katniss washed him down from head to toe then dried him off. She put fresh clothes on him; some woolen socks and some house slippers then stood up on her toes and kissed him.

Gale closed his eyes when he heard her say, "I love you more than anything in the world, Peeta Mellark."

And Peeta's gruff reply, "I love you too, Katniss...so damn much."

He had expected to feel pain...heartache...jealousy, even hatred, but none of those emotions filtered through his core. Instead he felt shame. This was the second time he had intentionally watched Katniss and Peeta without their knowledge and he didn't like himself much for making a habit out of it. He tried to go back to sleep, but the pain was too much and the quiet from the kitchen too tempting. He had expected to see them locked in a passionate kiss, but they were just standing there looking at one another, moving their lips. Gale couldn't make out what words their lips were forming, but whatever it was it caused Katniss to clench the center of Peeta's shirt in a fist and press her ear against his chest like she was checking his heart rate. Peeta kissed her head then Katniss turned her face to his. 'Okay, so now they're going to start the overzealous kissing,' Gale thought to himself. He wasn't wrong about them kissing one another, but there was nothing passionate about it. Peeta gave her three, soft, slow pecks against her waiting lips. The last one longer than the others. When he was through, he stepped back and Katniss began cleaning up the remnants of his sponge bath.

"Sorry," Gale heard Katniss say to Peeta with panic in her voice. "Did I hurt you? Oh, Peeta. I'm so sorry." She dropped the pile of his dirty clothing onto the floor.

"You didn't hurt me, Katniss." Peeta told her.

"Are you sure?" Katniss lifted up Peeta's injured hand and began turning it from side to side, examining it with her eyes. "I put the basin on top of your fingers."

"Don't worry about it." Peeta pulled his hand away and put it behind his back.

"What's wrong?" Katniss' voice began to raise some. "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's nothing...I just...I'm sure it's temporary." Peeta began.

"What's temporary?" Katniss asked and Gale wondered.

"I can't feel my fingers," Peeta admitted. For a moment, Gale wished he couldn't feel his back. 'It would be great not to be in pain,' he thought, but then the reality of it sunk in. 'If Peeta can't feel his fingers, then how's he supposed to use his hand?'

Katniss reached around Peeta and held onto his wrist, making sure not to touch his hand. "Which fingers?"

"Just the ones Prim had to put the stitches in between."

"You mean the ones you use to hold your paintbrush," Katniss closed her eyes and blew out a breath. "Dear, God, Peeta. Why didn't you say something to mom? She would've been able to..."

"She knows, Katniss." Peeta interrupted her. "I told Prim and she told mom about it."

Gale was trying to take stock of the situation. Not only did Peeta help him, he took several lashes from the whip himself and had to be stitched up. Now, he can't feel his fingers and... "You..." Gale choked and tried again. "You can't...feel...your fingers?" His words were coming out in between slow, uneven breaths and his voice sounded gravely.

"Gale," Katniss turned her head, but held onto Peeta's hand. She turned to look at Peeta and back at Gale again. It was like she was trying to make a choice.

Peeta made it for her. He walked towards Gale and took Katniss' fingers off of his wrist. "You need anything?" Peeta asked. "Some water or juice maybe? I can get you some juice."

"No, I'll get it," Katniss offered. "I've got some apple juice in here. That should be good for your stomach and it won't burn your throat." She went into the kitchen to fetch it as Peeta took a seat next to Gale.

"You...you didn't..." it was so hard for Gale to talk. His throat was so dry and achy, he was parched. "...answer me."

Peeta hung his head down; his bangs flopped across his forehead casting a shadow over the tip of his nose. "No. I can't feel two of them, but I'm sure it'll be fine in a day or two." He lifted his head. "Stuff like this used to happen all the time when I got hit before. I'd get a spanking or something and it would feel...sort of numb and then I'd be fine."

"Are you...numb?" Gale asked. Peeta didn't have to answer; Gale saw it in his eyes. Peeta couldn't feel a thing and that wasn't a temporary problem.

Katniss came back with a small glass of juice and a straw to sip it through for Gale, and then held it to his lips. "It's too soon for more medicine. Are you in pain? You must be. I'd give you something stronger, but I don't know what's what in that apothecary when it comes to pills. My mom doesn't label them."

"I'm sure mom doesn't want us to mix anything with the syrup and herbs she gave him already, Katniss," Peeta leaned his elbows on his knees and bent forward. "We could wake her."

"No," Gale's throat felt much better once he drank something to quench his thirst. "I can deal with it." He took a long pause and said, "I'm really tired."

Katniss sat down next to Peeta and told him, "That's the sleep syrup."

"I'm surprised it didn't knock you out," Peeta said. "I was out like a light for over a day."

"That's because...you're a wimp," Gale gave Peeta a weak smile.

"Yup," Peeta smiled back. "Just call me dough boy."

"Mom mixed it with herbs and she didn't give him as much as I gave you," Katniss turned to Peeta, saying it almost defensively. "Plus you had a high fever, Peeta."

"I know, Katniss. We were just kidding." Peeta looked at Gale. "Weren't we?"

"Yeah," Gale gave Katniss a smile.

"Oh..." Katniss said meekly. "I knew that." She took Peeta's good hand in hers and one of Gale's. "You two need to rest. You're no good to me like this."

Peeta lifted her fingers to his lips and placed a kiss against them. "Go change. You're filthy. I'll sit with Gale until he falls asleep, then I'll try and rest, okay?"

"Okay." Gale could feel her fingers squeezing his and watched as she cupped Peeta's face in her hands and placed a kiss against his lips. "I'll be right back."

He watched her as she disappeared around the corner then turned his attention to Peeta. "How come you get the kiss...while I'm the one...who got the beating?"

Peeta gave him a humble grin. "Guess I'm the lucky one."

Gale looked at Peeta's hand and said, "You don't look...too...lucky to me." The pain in his back was getting worse. He closed his eyes tightly and tried to push thoughts of it out of his mind, but the lasting effects of the whip's sharp stings were too prominent. Gale took in several deep breaths between clenched teeth. He tried to prevent the tears from falling, but he could no longer control his reaction to the pain. He didn't notice Peeta's face so close to his until he began to speak.

"Listen to my voice, Gale. Just concentrate on that. Open your eyes and look at me. Come on, Gale. Look at me." Gale didn't want to look at anyone. He wanted to scream...to yell, but Peeta kept insisting. "Damn it, Gale. Look at me!" Gale's eyes opened to find Peeta's just inches away from his. "Focus on my eyes." Gale did what he was told. "You're not in Katniss' house. You're in the woods. You know that spot by the big maple tree? There's a blackberry bush a stone's throw away. You know where I'm talking about, right? You and Katniss eat there all the time." Gale stared into Peeta's eyes, wondering why he was telling him this, but Peeta just kept on talking to him, describing the area right down to the bark on the tree. Suddenly Gale could see it...the maple tree...the blackberry bush. He had shared many meals there with Katniss over the years. "You can picture it now, can't you Gale?" Gale unintentionally nodded at Peeta. "Good. That's where you are. Its late spring so the blackberries are just starting to come in..." Gale was concentrating on the hypnotic sound of Peeta's voice. "...you can see the berries...firm...big...juicy and when you taste it, the flavor bursts in your mouth. Can you taste it, Gale? How sweet the

juice is." Gale could almost see Katniss tossing a blackberry in the air and him catching it in his mouth. "You and Katniss are in the woods...Prim's made some goat cheese and I've sent some fresh rolls for you. Picture it, Gale. You two, having a friendly picnic by the maple tree...the birds are chirping...you can hear the boisterous sounds of crickets rubbing their wings together to fill the air with music..." Gale had never thought about crickets as musical, but he could hear it now. Their sounds in harmony with the buzzing of the bees. "...squirrels are scurrying about...up and down the branches of the trees which are covered in fresh green leaves. Picture it Gale. See it in your mind." Gale felt his eyelids begin to droop and the pain in his back begin to subside. "Prim's goat cheese is creamy today. You break open a roll and hear the cracking of the crust as you split it apart. You spread the cheese over the fluffy center and bite into it..." Gale could taste the flavors of the bread and cheese...the blackberries. See the brightly colored green and yellow leaves...smell the flowers. He could hear the sounds of the woods surrounding him, not the gentle patter of Katniss' feet as she came upon them in the kitchen.

As sleep took him over he felt her kiss against the top of his head followed by her soft spoken voice saying, "I love you."

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Katniss sat on the edge of her bed in nothing but her undergarments. It had been a very long day...night. She felt as though she hadn't slept for a week. Gale had been beaten within an inch of his life and Peeta might possibly lose the use of his hand. It was all too much for Katniss to comprehend. Things were so much simpler a year ago, but a year...a week ago seemed like a lifetime ago. Katniss dragged herself off the bed and changed into something warm and comforting, a pair

of pants from her dresser and a sweater of Peeta's that Haymitch had packed for him. It came down to the middle of her thighs and she had to roll the sleeves up a few times, but wearing it made her feel like his arms were constantly surrounding her. She pulled on some socks and her slippers then headed for her door. She paused before exiting her room and looked at the clothes she left strewn about the floor thinking, 'You're right, Peeta. I'm a slob.' She went back in and picked them up then placed them in her hamper.

She could hear the sound of Peeta's voice as she walked into the kitchen. It was that warm and soothing tone that he used on her to calm her down. He'd been using it almost nightly on the tour to get her through the nightmares, but tonight he was using it on Gale. Katniss stood to the side and listened as Peeta described a day in the woods to Gale. She saw her friend's eyes slowly closing and knew he was falling into the familiar trance that she had so many times before. She took slow and careful steps towards the men, who had been nothing short of rivals not twenty-four hours earlier, and laced her fingers through Peeta's hair as he quietly comforted her best friend. It amazed Katniss how Peeta could look past people's shortcomings and see them for who they really were. She could tell that Peeta wasn't looking at Gale as the man that tried to take her away, but her friend who was in pain...in need. Katniss rested her cheek upon Peeta's hair for a second then placed a kiss against Gale's head as he slept. She looked into the face of the man she was going to marry and thought, 'I don't deserve you.' She trailed a finger along the edge of his perfect lips and said to him from the bottom of her heart, "I love you."

Peeta stood from his kneeling position in front of Gale and wrapped his arm around Katniss' waist. He buried his face in her hair and breathed her in. The day's events had finally caught up to him. His legs began to shake as he pulled her closer. "I need to sit down," he whispered.



Katniss stepped out of his embrace and pulled a chair over to him. When she went to sit in the empty seat next to him, he held his arms out to her and she climbed into his lap. "Peeta, I really think you should get some rest."

"I will. Let me just hold you for a little while." Peeta could feel her curling into him, but it wasn't enough. It was as though he had to remind himself he was still alive...they were still alive. He could feel himself finally coming down from the adrenaline rush he'd held onto for so many hours, but now in place of steely determination was need. A hunger that only she could feed. "Katniss," he pulled her head back and began to kiss her. As though she could read his every thought, her mouth was warm, willing and waiting for his. Her hands pulled his head closer to her, holding him against her and when their lips weren't enough, their tongues began their merciless dance. He held her as best as he could without using his hand. Her body was precariously perched on his lap, her knees wrapped around his torso, her hands gripping his face, her chest pressed into his. Peeta could feel his heart's wild rhythm and his mind racing in time. 'Katniss,' he thought to himself. 'What would I have done if it were you lying on that table? If you had taken even more of a whipping than you did? Please don't ever try to do something like that again. I know he's your friend, but I'll take care of him...of you. I can't stand the thought of anything happening to you.' He gently yanked her away from him by her hair and said throatily, "I love you," then continued to demonstrate how much. When their breathing became labored and Gale began to stir, they pulled apart.

Katniss slid her body off of Peeta's and sat in the chair next to his. She had almost felt guilty for giving into their needs, but their actions seemed to have a somewhat refining affect on her. She felt whole again. "I want you to get some sleep."

"I think we both know I won't be able to," Peeta told her. "Why don't we just..." Peeta's eyes scanned the living room. "Can you lift that rocker?"

Katniss looked at the large chair and said, "I think so."

"Bring it in here. We'll take turns resting and keeping an eye on Gale."

She couldn't lift it, but she dragged it by the little rug it sat on and moved it alongside of the kitchen table where Gale was laid out. "You first," Katniss said.

"Both of us," Peeta sat in the large chair and held his hand out to her. She climbed into his lap and he pushed a foot against the floor causing a gently swaying motion. "I wish there was something more I could do for him."

"Me too," Katniss said against Peeta's chest. The combination of Peeta's arms wrapped around her and the easy glide of the chair had her feeling very relaxed. She yawned and said, "My mom should be awake in a little while, then she should be able to give him something else for the pain."

"Shhh," Peeta ran his good hand down Katniss' hair. "I don't want to wake him up again. Let's just sit quietly." He pushed his foot against the floor in a steady rhythm. He could feel Katniss' breathing start to slow. Soon it was even and shallow. He didn't have to look to see that she had finally fallen asleep.

Haymitch walked into the house shortly after first light carrying two packages. "Hey, kid."

Katniss had been up for a few minutes and was not too pleased that Peeta had let her fall asleep. She was in the kitchen putting on a pot

of tea. "What's that?" She lifted her chin, gesturing to the items in Haymitch's arms.

"Gifts from Effie."

Peeta was wiped out and tempted to take a nap on the sofa, but he didn't want to just in case Katniss needed him for something. "That was nice of her." He didn't really care about new paints since he was sure he wouldn't be able to use them for quite some time...if ever again. He cleared his head of those thoughts, pushing them to the back of his mind, not wanting to dwell on his own misery while there was still so much more to worry about.

"Where's your mom, sweetheart?" Haymitch asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Asleep," Katniss answered.

"I heard her walking around up there...it's either her or Prim," Peeta informed them.

"Good," Haymitch had a wicked gleam in his eye. "Why don't you go get her?" He said to Katniss.

"If she's up, she'll be down soon enough." Katniss didn't feel like dragging her mother downstairs before she was ready. Her mother was going to have a full day ahead of her and needed her rest.

"Go on, sweetheart. I need to talk to her."

"She'll be down soon," Katniss put the pot of water on the stove for tea.

Haymitch's hand grabbed hers before she could turn the stove on. "Get your mom, sweetheart," his voice was politely demanding.

"Fine," Katniss snapped. She spun on her heels and went to fetch her mother.

Haymitch took the smaller of the two crates and walked up to Peeta. "Want me to open this for you?" Peeta had no idea why his mentor was grinning so wildly.

"I really don't care. It's not like I can use them." Peeta answered.

"Still...might be nice to see what she sent," Haymitch began prying the lid off of the small crate.

Inside Peeta saw rows of various tubes of paints. The selection was huge. Effie had outdone herself. Peeta smiled thinking his escort's heart was in the right place even if her brain wasn't. "I'll have to call her and thank her later."

"Want to look them over?" Haymitch asked eagerly.

"Maybe later, Haymitch."

"Sure...sure, kid." Haymitch looked from side to side and began to pace back and forth. "Maybe we should take these back to your place...put them away?"

Peeta was getting tired of Haymitch dwelling on such an insignificant thing. "Maybe you could bring it there for me? I kind of have other things on my mind right now."

Gale began to stir at the sound of their voices. Haymitch went into the kitchen and set the paints on the counter then lifted the lid to the larger box. He lifted a couple of bottles and examined them, then put one next to the sink. The others he kept holding up to the light, tilting the bottles...looking at them and finally putting one next to the other on

the sink. Peeta didn't think he smelled alcohol on the man's breath, but it wouldn't surprise him if Haymitch had been drunk already. Especially if Effie had sent him whiskey. 'Wait a minute,' Peeta thought to himself. 'Effie would never send Haymitch booze.' Peeta stood up and walked over to his mentor, furrowing his brow and looking at the bottles. Haymitch gave him a mischievous grin and twisted the cap off of the brown liquid; he held it up to Peeta's nose for him to sniff before setting it down. Peeta had expected it to smell like Haymitch whenever they were traveling or in the Capitol, but it didn't. It smelled medicinal. It smelled like the stuff the Capitol had made him drink after he won the Games. Peeta's eyes lit up as he realized exactly what Effie Trinket had sent them. 'My God,' he thought. 'I love that woman!'

Katniss' mother entered the kitchen with Katniss following closely behind. "She was up. Prim's still sleeping though, so keep it down," Katniss gave Haymitch a stern look.

"Yeah, no problem." Haymitch turned his attention to her mother. "Thought you might want to give Gale a couple of shots of whiskey to help with his pain. It might help."

Before his soon to be mother in law could protest, Peeta grasped her wrist with his good hand and gave her a nod. "Haymitch hates to share his alcohol, so I'd take advantage of it if I were you."

Haymitch held out a bottle of milky white liquid, clearly not whiskey, to Katniss' mother. She uncapped it and took a whiff then stared at both men in disbelief. Haymitch handed her the other bottle and he whispered in her ear, "Antibiotic."

Evelyn Everdeen ran to her apothecary and took out a syringe, quickly racing back to the bottle that held the milky white liquid. She filled it, tapped the side of it to get the unwanted air bubbles out and ordered

Haymitch to, "Pour a shot of that whiskey. I have a small glass in that cupboard." She pointed to the one above his head.

Katniss stood back wondering why her mother was going to shoot Gale with a needle full of alcohol. "Wha..."

Peeta placed his fingers over her lips and whispered in her ear. "Shhh...it's medicine."

Katniss didn't understand what was happening. She wanted to ask them how they got a hold of medications for Gale, but she knew she couldn't do so in her house, so she stood back and watched as her mother lifted Gale's head and made him swallow a glass of whiskey...medicine, she had no clue, then gave him a shot in the arm.

Haymitch whispered something in her mother's ear, to which she nodded and began boiling a large pot of water, then adding in empty glass bottles from her medical cabinet. Katniss knew she was sterilizing the containers, but she didn't know why until her mother began pouring the milky white liquid into the clean jars then sealing them and storing them away. Finally she boiled the empty bottle that had originally held the medication and gave it back to Haymitch. She put the bottle of whiskey in the apothecary along with the rest of her medical supplies and said, "Peeta, have you gotten any sleep?"

"No. He hasn't," Katniss answered for him.

"Why don't I take the kid home for awhile?" Haymitch offered. "He can lie down...get some rest. Katniss can come and keep an eye on him."

"That sounds like a fine idea," Evelyn said. "Gale will be sleeping for a few hours now that he's had some whiskey." She turned to Haymitch. "Thank you for the bottle. I know how you hate to part with it."

"Considering the circumstances...I figured the boy could use it a lot more than I could," Haymitch said. "Come on, kid." He picked up the crate with the paints in it. "Let's get you home for a little while."

"I'm really not tired," Peeta insisted, even though he was exhausted.

"Peeta, go home and rest," Evelyn told him. "Katniss. Take care of him." They were about to walk out before she stopped them. "Wait." She got out the antibiotic and poured Peeta a small shot glass full and handed it to him.

Peeta tasted the familiar flavor of the brown liquid. He hated it. "See you later."

They walked into his house and Haymitch set down the crate full of paints on Peeta's table. "Look through these things kid. I won't know one from the other."

"Do you think she sent something else too?" Peeta asked.

"I know she did. She sent something for your hand," Haymitch answered.

"Who sent what?" Katniss felt like she was losing her mind. Peeta was picking up each tube of paint and staring at it.

"She said something about your favorite color," Haymitch told him.

"Orange," Peeta mumbled as he looked for the tube with the orange lid. "Here it is. Ha! It's oil based. She knows I don't use those."

"Who knows what?" Katniss yelled. "Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?"

"Effie!" Haymitch said with a huge smile. "That woman never ceases to amaze me!"

Peeta handed it to Haymitch. "Open this." The smell assaulted Peeta instantly, but the tube was too small to help Gale. "Is there another one?" He began looking through the paints again.

"Doesn't look like it, kid."

"What did Effie do?" Katniss asked trying not to let her frustrations get out of hand.

"She smuggled us medications from the Capitol," Peeta answered. "But..." he picked up tube after tube of paint. "There's not enough."

"What are you talking about, kid? That's plenty to help you out," Haymitch took the medicine from his hand.

"Me?" Peeta felt his anger bubbling over. "What about Gale? What the hell am I supposed to do about Gale's wounds?"

"Wait a minute...you mean that stuff can help you, Peeta?" Katniss took the tube from Haymitch's hand. "What is it?"

"Remember when I cut my hand at the Capitol?"

Of course Katniss remembered. She was the reason he cut it. "Yes."

"This is the stuff Portia used on it to make it better," Peeta pulled out a kitchen chair and let himself collapse. "But there's not enough here for Gale. I don't know what that little tube is supposed to accomplish on his back."

"It's not for Gale." Haymitch told him. "Effie sent it for you, kid."



"And you expect me to use it? While Gale is lying there..." Peeta stood up and kicked the chair away from him. "NO! I will not heal myself and let him suffer!"

"Peeta, don't be stupid," Katniss walked up to him and placed a calming hand on his shoulder. "There's no way Effie could've sent enough for the both of you and you need this."

"So does he. Let him have it."

"It won't do him any good," Haymitch tried his best to get Peeta to change his mind. "The boy needed something for pain...Effie saw to that. She sent enough pain medication to last a long, long time. He needed something to make sure his wounds didn't get infected...she sent him that too." Haymitch paused. "Effie sent the best medicine possible for Gale...and you. Now don't be stupid, boy. Use the stuff."

"No," Peeta turned to Haymitch. "If it's going to be used. Gale can use it. I know how this medication works. By tomorrow I'll barely have a mark on my hand and Gale...he'll..." Peeta turned away. "No. I can't."

Katniss began shaking her head back and forth. "You have to." She reached for his bandaged hand determined to remove the gauze and apply the orange cream. "You can't feel your fingers. If you don't use this you may never be able to use your hand again."

Peeta held his arm above his head, keeping his hand out of Katniss reach. "Stop it, Katniss! If you want to use it so damn bad, go put it on Gale's back."

"Gale's back?" She yelled. "What about your hand?"

"Listen to the girl." Haymitch gave Peeta a warning. "You willing to lose the ability to use that hand because Gale's back won't be pretty anymore?"

"Shut up, Haymitch!" Peeta yelled at him. "Don't ask me to do this, Katniss," Peeta lowered his voice down. "Please."

Katniss backed away from him. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "And you call me stubborn? Peeta what if you can't paint anymore?"

"I couldn't paint for years...couldn't afford it," Peeta said with a tight jaw.

"You know...sometimes you can be a real ass!" She ran out of his house and slammed the door behind her.

"Katniss!" He called to her, but before he could run after her, Haymitch stopped him.

"Effie risked her life for you, kid. That woman put herself in jeopardy just so you could use your hand again and you're going to throw that away?"

"I'm not throwing it away." Peeta turned to him.

"No. Of course, you're not." Haymitch said sarcastically as he headed for Peeta's door. "Imagine if Katniss went to that feast and you refused to use the medication when she got back to the cave."

Peeta stopped walking and glared at Haymitch. "It's not the same."

"Isn't it?" Haymitch put his hand on the doorknob. "The difference is, if Effie got caught, her life wouldn't be over quickly like a tribute in the arena...they'd make her suffer...torture her for years...yet she risked

it, knowing what the outcome would be if someone found out what she was up to." Haymitch twisted the knob and said, "She did that for you, kid. For you...because she loves you." He opened the door and walked out.

Katniss was holding onto Gale's hand with both of hers. She was whispering to him when Peeta walked in.

"How're you feeling?" Peeta walked up to Gale.

Gale gave Katniss a little tilt of his head, like he was telling her to go away. Katniss stood up and walked into the kitchen and sipped at a cup of tea. "Sit down," Gale said quietly to Peeta.

"You need anything?" Peeta asked him.

"Yeah. I need you to pull your head out of your ass," Gale answered.

Peeta glared at Katniss who arched a brow at him, daring him to start something with her. "Gale..."

"I'm about to pass out here, Peeta so come closer and listen." Peeta leaned his head in as Gale began to whisper to him. "Use the drugs. They won't do me a damn bit of good, but they'll help you and you'll need two hands to take care of her." Peeta closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. "My back will be fine...just a bit scarred. Your fingers..." Gale stopped speaking and Peeta thought he had fallen asleep from the medication he was given. He pulled away and heard Gale's voice again. "Someone told me once, 'Pride does no one any good when it comes to survival.' Smart guy. A bit of a dough boy...but smart," Gale gave him a pathetic grin. "Don't let pride stand in your way, Peeta."

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It had been over eight weeks since Effie sent her gift to Katniss. She had expected to hear something back from them sooner, but it wasn't until the middle of the ninth week that Peeta sent a surprise via Capitol train informing Effie of the goings on within their district. Katniss and Peeta had been speaking to their stylists regularly and Effie called on occasion to keep them up to date with the wedding plans, but they all knew to call for no reason and simply say hi, how are you, would be frowned upon and they most certainly couldn't tell them the things they had said in their recording. Since Peeta's injury only one delivery of art supplies had been sent to him. If they sent too much someone would question it. The only thing keeping Effie's mind occupied was keeping the rebellion efforts going. The uprising in District Eight had come to an end, but that didn't mean the rebels had given up. More and more districts were slowing down their productions. Not meeting quotas due to mechanical malfunctions, lack of supplies... The fishermen in District Four had rigged their gear so they could no longer catch shrimp by the net full and their crab traps had been fixed not to close so the creatures could escape with ease. Each boat had Peacekeepers stationed on them now, and they were reporting back to their superiors letting them know that there was no foul play going on. It was simply a bad season. In District Three the materials they received were subpar and they were unable to meet the supplies the Capitol residents demanded for electronic devices. District Seven slowed down lumber production and so on and so on. The only district that didn't seem to be having a problem producing their "goods" was Two, where Peacekeepers were being pumped out nonstop.

On the bright side, Plutarch had suggested a nationwide contest to President Snow in regards to Katniss and Peeta's wedding attire, planting a little seed in his brain that keeping it in the Capitol might be for the best. In the end, Snow suggested to Plutarch that they run

several television specials in the Capitol only and once they got down to the final few choices they could allow the rest of the nation to view it on television. Effie didn't think the rest of the nation would ever see it, but she could hope.

Slowly but surely, Effie, Cinna and Portia snuck items into their hideout. Plutarch brought the food in through his home as his house was the easiest to explain food delivery. Over the course of several weeks, the barren room that had once been dark, cold stone was now lit up by the touch of a button. Cinna had converted his synthetic fire idea and turned it into a way to light the pathways and the room. A storage cabinet from the bar had been brought in one night after closing and was now stocked with bottles of water, non perishable foods, blankets, matches, knives, medications and anything a hiding rebel would need. In the depths of Effie's mind she knew she was preparing a secret home for Katniss and Peeta. If for some reason they needed to run and hide, no one would ever think to look for them right under Snow's nose.

Effie took a breath and brushed a stray hair away from her forehead. 'You can do this, Effie Trinket,' she thought to herself. Tonight would be her biggest haul of medication to date. She couldn't take too much at once as there wasn't an endless supply of the items and people were sure to notice, especially since there were no tributes or mentors in the Capitol and every escort knew that was when the medical supplies were really used. Their little group of rebels at the Capitol had planned this ever since Plutarch told them about the television special. Cinna and Portia would be featured live at the City Center, Plutarch would be running the show and Effie would be stealing medical supplies while the residents of the Capitol sat glued to their television screens to see the unveiling of twenty-four wedding gowns and tuxedo designs. Effie had two hours from start to finish. Two hours to get the items she needed, get them to their hideout and return to the City

Center. Every minute...second was accounted for. She wouldn't even have time to unpack the items once she reached the hideout. All she could do was walk into Tigris' shop, dressed as a delivery attendant and leave them behind the closed door, she couldn't even change her clothing there. She'd have to wait until she got back to the City Center and change in the dark corridors leading to the escort's medical bay. She tugged on the sleeve of the attendant's uniform and hoped no one would notice her going into the desolate area of the medical center. She loaded the items she needed into the empty boxes she brought with her and stopped moving when she heard the footsteps coming towards her. Effie looked to each side of her, trying to figure out where she could hide. She pushed the boxes next to a shelf and squeezed underneath it just in the nick of time.

"She doesn't fool me one bit," Effie heard the familiar shrill of a fellow escort speaking. "That woman could care less about those two. All she cares about is getting a better position."

"Can you blame her?" Another escort said. "Who would want District Twelve?" They both laughed and Effie wanted to yank on their spindly ankles from her spot under the shelf and make them fall face first against the floor.

"Goodness knows I could never have dealt with that man for as many years as she has, but when you're desperate to be an escort..."

"Now, now, Lucinda...he did bring home two victors this year."

"Two victors and a hell of a hangover." Effie pursed her lips and clenched her fists at the sounds of their cackling at Haymitch's expense.

Effie heard the shuffling of items on shelves and the two women discussing the products they could use to tighten up their skin and

make their lips puffy. She never understood why those things were provided for them since there was no medical value other than cosmetic, but those were the items that went the quickest, second to morphling. She tried not to pay attention to the conversation the escorts were having as it only infuriated her, they were doing nothing but talking about other escorts and their own tributes that had perished in the Games. Calling them useless and weak. When they began insulting her own kids, it took everything in Effie's power to hold her position and not ring their necks.

"That girl was a bit...loose with her kisses. Has she never heard of playing hard to get?"

"Look at where she's from. Not that being from coal country should excuse her promiscuity..."

'Promiscuity!' The word echoed through Effie's head. 'How dare they!'

"...but she should have had enough sense to keep him at arms length...for a little while at least. The way she behaved with him in that cave..."

'They could've died at any minute,' Effie wanted to scream at them. 'And you think she should've played hard to get with Peeta?'

"I heard they shared the same compartment on the train during the Victory Tour. That girl couldn't stay out of his bed."

"Oh, I would have never allowed that if they were my victors!"

Effie cringed at her fellow escort's unspoken accusations.

"At least the boy was polite." Effie heard the woman gasp. "We're almost out of it." Effie didn't know what 'it' was and she didn't care. She just wanted these women to leave.

"Don't worry darling, we can get more."

"I'm not sure when. Things have been taking so long to replace lately. It's as though we keep emptying the supplies and no one bothers to replenish them."

"Hmmm..." Effie closed her eyes as the women made more small talk and ate away at her time. She hoped they would leave before the show ended just so she could make it back to the City Center. She could always come back for the medication at a later date, but Katniss' mother needed the items now.

"I heard they're considering her for a position as a Gamemaker."

"A Gamemaker! Why she hasn't even been moved to a better district as an escort!"

"I know. I know, but someone somewhere is impressed with her recent performance during the Games and if Twelve does well in the Quell...I wouldn't be surprised if Effie Trinket was bumped all the way up to Gamemaker after that."

"Why that's just preposterous! She did no more for her tributes than we did!"

"Yes, darling, but both of hers are still alive and everyone knows that Abernathy was too inebriated to function on his own, so she must've helped him out. I know I saw her talking with sponsors left and right."



"Oh, I hate that woman. It wouldn't bother me so much if I actually believed she cared about her two victors, but you know it's all an act. Everyone knows it. She puts on such a face for the camera and the minute it's off she looks like she can't wait until they're out of her sight."

"Have you ever gotten attached to your tributes?"

"I would if one of them actually won." Both women laughed.

"I don't know why she doesn't care for them. Well...I can understand her apprehension towards the girl, she is a bit rough around the edges, but the boy is exceptionally well mannered."

"All I know is, if it were my victors getting married, I'd make sure I was on every television special talking about how wonderful they were, not avoiding the cameras and hiding out in the shadows. I'd never let the stylists hog all the camera time."

"Perhaps you'd like to be moved to Twelve when she's made a Gamemaker?" One woman laughed while the other gasped. "Then you can be around Katniss and Peeta all the time."

"Oh, stop that. I can't help it if I think they're sweet together. Okay, I'm a little put off by the girl at times, but you must admit...her bravado is admirable."

Effie watched their feet disappear and listened to the sound of their heels clicking as they walked away.

"Peeta is quite..."

Effie didn't know what they said about Peeta and she didn't care. She squeezed out from under her shelf and found her boxes which were

untouched. She loaded them with the rest of the supplies she needed and stopped at the cosmetic area that her fellow escorts were so fond of. Effie pursed her lips and made one large motion with her arm sweeping the remaining supplies into the box. Effie mumbled to herself. "How dare you call Katniss promiscuous." She had taken much more than she should've from the medical bay but she was so damn angry with those women, she wanted to teach them a lesson. 'Of course, the rebellion would have no use for the items, but maybe Plutarch could fatten up his lips again,' Effie thought to herself as she ran towards her destination with her boxes of medications.

Effie made it back to the City Center with barely any time to spare, changed into her regular attire, got rid of the black eye liner that adorned her eyes and applied her traditional makeup as quickly as possible. She could hear the sound of applause floating through the air as she stepped off of the elevator and headed backstage. She gave her wig a little tug and stood proudly in the fold of a curtain as though she had been watching the entire interview between Caesar, Portia and Cinna then greeted the host when he stepped off of the main stage.

"Caesar, darling. You were wonderful!"

"Effie. When am I going to ha...Oh, my..." Effie wondered why he was staring at her with such a curious expression across his face. "Your lips, dear. Are we trying something new?"

Her lips! Effie had forgotten to take off the traditional black lipstick the Capitol servants wore and replace it with her own shade of green.

"Yes I am," she answered brightly. "Doesn't it make me look...barbaric?" She asked with a wicked gleam in her eye.

"It does, darling," Caesar held his arm out to her and escorted her offstage. "Where did you ever get it? I love it!"

Portia jumped in, "I thought we'd use Effie as a bit of a trial run for a new look we've been thinking about here in the Capitol. You know...black goes so well with the gold in the mockingjay designs."

Caesar turned to Portia and Cinna and said, "You two never stop astonishing me with your creative musings."

Within a week, everywhere Effie looked people were wearing black lipstick and Katniss' gold mockingjay design had become more popular than ever.

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Peeta lay with one arm wrapped around Katniss, his hand resting against the flat of her stomach while he held the other in front of him, moving his fingers about...examining the faint scars the whip had left behind. He spread his fingers and looked between them to see the line that had formed there after the medication Effie had sent him, healed it. The scarring there was the worst, but so was the injury he received. He glanced back down at a sleeping Katniss, grateful that she had stayed with him after the night they had shared and didn't try to run away from him. She was good at running away from her feelings. Even after all that they'd been through; she still kept so much of herself closed off from him. He saw through it all, but she still tried to hide her insecurities. He placed a kiss against her forehead and brushed the hair away from her eyes. He felt his index finger twitch and closed his hand in a fist. There were still times when he lost control of his fingers...his paintbrush would simply fall out of his grasp. Trying to retrain his hand was a lot harder than learning how to use his prosthetic leg. His leg had been attached to his nervous system...his muscles...it had become a part of him. His hand however, there was damage done to it, that Effie's medication wasn't able to repair.

Damage done to his psyche that nothing would ever fix. Now along with nightmares of the arena in which he lost Katniss and couldn't find her, he was filled with bad dreams of her being bludgeoned to death by a whip. Sometimes the new Head was dishing out the lashes, others it was President Snow himself. On the rare occasion, Peeta had nightmares about the whip coming down on him, but before it landed, he'd wake up covered in a cold sweat then he'd wait for the Peacekeepers to come and take him or Katniss away, but they never showed.

Peeta remembered the morning the medication had come and when he had finally agreed to use it. Prim had woken up and been sent to his house with them. She had to remove the stitches she had put in there only the day before and applied the cream deep into Peeta's wounds. He remembered screaming in pain a couple of times when Prim had to work on his hand, even though he tried not to, then he remembered sighing with relief when the cream touched his skin. How he wished Gale could've felt that way. The guilt still ate away at Peeta every time he looked at his hand or he'd see Gale heading to and from the mines. He had to keep his hand bandaged in public for weeks afterward, no one would understand how it recovered so quickly and when he and Katniss were at her house, her mother and Prim always spoke to him about it, pretended to look at it making comments about his recovery and how grateful they were that the feeling came back to his fingers so quickly. They were all getting quite good at play acting for the Capitol's listening pleasure. In the meantime, Katniss stayed with him for a short period of time, like they had suggested that very first night Peeta was hurt. They still spent plenty of time at Katniss' house, Peeta had been the one helping Gale move about, taking him to the restroom when he needed to, and keeping him company when he couldn't sleep at night, while Katniss slept on the sofa. And somehow over the course of that time period, Peeta believed Gale was slowly becoming his friend or at least a good acquaintance. The

feeling might not have been mutual, but that didn't matter to Peeta. He saw a lot of the same qualities in Gale that he saw in Katniss, but one...Gale was missing the one thing that Katniss had in abundance, compassion. Gale had it for those he loved and was willing to fight in a war for people's rights to be free from the Capitol's power, but he lacked it for anyone other than those closest to him.

*Late one night Gale had confessed to Peeta, "I never would've done what you did for me. If I had come upon someone being whipped in the square, I would've been like everyone else and minded my own business. About the only person I would've stepped in for would be Katniss...or my family."*

*"You mean you wouldn't have helped me out?" Peeta said it jokingly, but somewhere deep inside he wanted to know.*

*Gale hung his head down and said, "No." And left it at that. Peeta couldn't help but respect Gale for his honesty.*

Peeta could feel Katniss stirring against him. "Hey," he grinned down at her and kissed her forehead. "You had a good night's sleep."

Katniss stretched her arms out above her head and flexed her toes. "Mmmmm...I swear, I haven't slept that good in years."

"Gee...I wonder why you slept so well," he gave her a catty smile.

"Shut up, Peeta," she tried to roll out of his arms, but he wasn't having it. She really didn't want to think about her actions last night. "Let me go."

"Not yet." He pulled her against his body and whispered to her. He knew she'd be feeling a little self conscious that morning after the

night before, but he had to make her realize there was nothing to be ashamed of. "I love you, Katniss."

She buried her face against his neck and whispered back, "I know. I love you too."

"Then...you're okay?" He asked.

She was quiet for a few seconds then answered. "Yeah. I'm just a little...embarrassed." 'Which is saying something for you,' she thought to herself. 'I think you've been embarrassed about something you've done about three times in your life.'

"Why? You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"The things I did...said..." Katniss pressed her face even deeper into him. "Oh, God, Peeta. How humiliating. I know I can get out of hand at times, but last night was...I mean...even for me...it was..."

"Katniss, look at me." Peeta put his hand on her face and tried to pull her out of her hiding spot. "Please?" He gently begged. When she lifted her eyes to his he said, "You can say anything...do anything in front of me and I'd still love you. While you were...screaming last night all I could think to myself was...God, I love this woman."

"You're crazy."

"Yes I am. Crazy about you," he kissed her.

Katniss sat up, put her head in her hands and thought back to the night before.

*"Why are you playing with that damn thing?" She asked Peeta.*

*"I like the song." Peeta picked up the music box Effie had sent to Katniss and looked at it. There was nothing inside of it, but some gears and a little metal box, they had all searched it thoroughly thinking Effie might have sent something else in secret to them. They had finally concluded that it was just a music box. The note that came with it had stated it was an antique and hard to come by which is why it was so heavy. "The song's called Beautiful Dreamer."*

*"I don't know what that woman was thinking when she sent that thing to me. Neither one of us has beautiful dreams," Katniss quipped.*

*"Maybe she thought listening to the song might help us to have some," Peeta looked over his shoulder at Katniss as she sat on his bed and gave the crank on the music box a twist. He carried it over to the nightstand and set it down next to his phone. "It's pretty."*

*Katniss couldn't help but grin at him. "You're a sucker for beautiful things."*

*He pulled her into his arms and said, "You know it."*

*Their lips met instantly. Katniss had loved being with him at night. She didn't stay at his house every night, but when she did they had kept their physical contact chaste when it came to bedtime, at Peeta's insistence, so she was surprised he was kissing her with such gusto. "What happened to, 'I don't want to tempt myself, Katniss?'" She asked him against his lips.*

*"I can stop if you want me to," he said huskily.*

*She shook her head. "Don't." She trailed her hand down his face and let her fingers linger against his chin.*

*"I miss you, Katniss...miss being close to you like this."*

*"Me too," her lips found his once again in a passionate exploration of love.*

*In no time at all they were lying on their sides, their arms wrapped around each other's bodies, their legs entwined. Katniss let her knee travel up his thigh and rest against his hip. She could feel a stirring in her belly...a tightness. Everything in her wanted...craved more. She pushed him flat on his back and rolled herself on top of him, never breaking their kiss. She often wondered how he learned to perform the act of kissing so well, but was afraid to ask him for fear that his answer might send her into a tailspin. Katniss could feel his hands running up and down her back, over her hips and pulling her closer to him. She had never thought she'd be the aggressor when it came to physical contact, she knew where it could lead, however, since getting engaged to Peeta, things had become a little more heated between them, which was why he put their, no kissing in bed rule, into play. Katniss was thrilled that he had made an exception to it that night. It was a great way to end a good day.*

*Things in District Twelve had changed so much since Gale and Peeta's whipping. The mine shut down for two weeks, Hazelle was out of work...everyone was afraid to use her for their laundry services; food deliveries had become almost nonexistent. The only ones that weren't hurting were the victors of District Twelve. They never wanted for anything. Haymitch had mentioned to Effie in casual conversation that they were getting a bit low on basic items over the phone one day and the next day three crates were delivered full of food items for them. Since then all of their groceries were delivered via Effie Trinket. It made Katniss sick. The people of the district couldn't even rely on the Hob any longer now that the Peacekeepers burned it down. At times Katniss wondered what the Peacekeepers were eating. Her longtime customers were gone and replaced with new Peacekeepers. All of them seemed to be miniature replicas of the new Head, Thread*



and just as vicious. Katniss and Peeta had tried to give Hazelle as much as they could without being discovered. Haymitch had hired her as his new housekeeper, so it was easy to explain her daily visits, but it wouldn't be easy to explain where she got the food from that she carried home, so either Haymitch or Peeta walked her home. They always carried her bag, only handing it to her once she was safe within the confines of her home. Katniss had barely spoken to Gale since the incident in the square, but Peeta had. It was odd to Katniss that Peeta and Gale would have conversations, even basic ones, without arguing. Katniss had asked Peeta once if Gale talked about her, but he told her no and Katniss didn't think he was lying so she never asked again. Though Katniss and Peeta had taken daily walks through District Twelve, they had become pariahs to almost everyone but their closest friends and even they had to speak to them on the sly, with the exception of Madge, who was just as much of an outcast, being the Mayor's daughter. She came to visit Katniss and Peeta more often than not. Everything had become scarce in their district. Haymitch's liquor supply had been dwindling and Effie couldn't or wouldn't send more via the train. Ripper, the woman that made the white liquor Haymitch was so fond of, had been in the newly built stocks that were now stationed next to several other similar devices in the center of the square. Peeta had walked by her one day and whispered to her that he had checked on her son and the boy was doing alright. Katniss had no clue that Peeta went to the woman's home, where it was or that she even had a child, but she was grateful he had put the woman's mind at ease. The food that was available was limited. Even if a person did have money to buy something, there was usually nothing to buy. More and more beatings had taken place, none quite as severe as Gale's, but the endless supply of injured bodies at her doorstep, kept fresh the cruelty the Capitol was capable of inflicting upon people on a daily basis. The Games were no longer the only thing they worried about. Now people worried whether or not

they'd live to make it through a day. More and more kids signed up for the tesserae including Gale's brother Rory, but were turned away empty handed. That day was the last time Katniss had heard from Gale all together. She knew it was because he was ashamed he could no longer provide for his family, the woods were strictly off limits, even Katniss wasn't willing to tempt fate. But today...today was **the** day. It was Parcel Day. The packages were delivered two weeks later than normal, but they had finally arrived. Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch decided to stay home, away from the crowds, to prevent any unwanted trouble or displays from the Peacekeepers. The entire day Katniss felt a sense of relief knowing that the one good thing the Games did for her district was provide much needed food and oil. So that night, when Peeta took her in his arms she knew why he was willing to forgo his no kissing in bed rule. His need to be close to her was just as great as hers was to be close to him.

Katniss sat up, straddled Peeta's lap and took her hair out of her braid, never breaking eye contact with him. She relished the look of love he had in his eyes when he gazed up at her. When her tresses were flowing freely around her shoulders he ran his fingers through her hair and pulled her back down to his eager mouth. She could feel his heart pounding against her chest, hear his jagged breathing. Her fingers began to roam around his stomach; she slid her hands underneath his pajama shirt and rested her palms against his muscular belly. The sound of his throaty moan was enough to drive her wild with desire. "Peeta," she breathed against his lips. She had never wanted to feel his hands on her as much as she did in that very minute. Her hand shot out from under his shirt and gripped his. She pulled it down to her waist and slid it under her shirt so she could feel him touching her the same way she was touching him.

"Katniss," he pulled his lips away from hers, but she refused to stop kissing him. "We should stop this befo..." His arms gripped her around

*the waist and pulled her into him then his hands trailed up her bare back and Katniss was sure she was about to explode with desire. She threw her head back and let out a breath of air.*

*The sound of the phone ringing left both of them panting and staring at the other as if in shock. Katniss rolled off of Peeta and answered it. She didn't want to, but with all of the injured people showing up at her house lately, she didn't dare ignore the call. "He..." she cleared her throat. "Hello?"*

*"Hey, sweetheart."*

*"Haymitch." Katniss wanted to kill the man. "What do you want?"*

*"Talked to Gale tonight?" Haymitch asked.*

*"No. Why?" Her words were clipped.*

*"Just wondering." Haymitch paused before asking, "Is the boy around?"*

*Katniss looked at Peeta who was lying with one arm over his eyes and the other against his stomach. "Yeah, he's here." She held the phone out to Peeta and gave him a nudge. "It's Haymitch."*

*Peeta took the phone from Katniss without lifting his arm from his eyes.*

*On one hand she was pissed as hell that Haymitch had called, but on the other hand she was grateful. Regret instantly flooded through her for her actions. She sat on the edge of the bed chastising herself for the way she had behaved with Peeta only seconds ago. 'You're not married to him yet. And when you are married? Then what, Katniss? Are you ready for this? No. Yes! I have no clue. God, yes. No. Shut*

*up. Oh, great, now you're fighting with yourself.' She put her hands over her head and let it hang down before thinking, 'You love him. You've got two months until your married so get yourself together and stop acting like a child. If you think moments like these aren't going to happen in the next couple of months, you're fooling yourself.' She stood up and padded to the bathroom. When she looked in the mirror she didn't recognize the wild eyed look she was still carrying, the frenzied hair, the flushed cheeks...chest, her swollen lips... "Great. I'm a harlot," she sniffed out a breath before splashing some cold water on her face. She walked back into the bedroom to see Peeta sitting on the edge of the bed. She had decided to face the situation head on and not hide behind her insecurities. "Okay, we need to go back to the no kissing in bed rule because I don't think either one of us..." Peeta had a serious expression on his face and Katniss didn't think it had anything to do with what had just happened between them. "Peeta? Is everything all right?"*

*"Sit down, Katniss."*

*"I don't want to sit down." She stared at Peeta trying to think of what could've happened in the past few minutes. He had talked to Haymitch, who had asked Katniss if she had spoken to Gale. "Oh, my God. Is Gale okay?" She ran to Peeta. "Did something happen to him?"*

*"No...I mean yes. He's fine...sort of." Peeta gulped.*

*"Then what is it?" Katniss could feel her nerves unraveling.*

*"The parcels that were delivered today..."*

*"What about them?" Katniss knew how many people were depending on those packages. Those packages could save the lives of many*

*starving children in their district. Katniss feared the worst. "They came, didn't they?"*

*"Yes, they came." Peeta held onto her hands. "But they were spoiled and what wasn't rotten had been infested by rodents."*

*Katniss began shaking her head. "No. No. That's not possible." She began to pace back and forth around the room. "We were told our district would get those each month if we won the Games."*

*Peeta stood up and sighed. "Did you really think they'd keep their word?"*

*Anger...fury...downright rage filled her. "Then we'll call them. Complain," she held up the phone to Peeta. "What's Effie's number?"*

*Peeta took the receiver from her hand and said, "Even Effie can't help with this one, Katniss. She's doing the best she can."*

*"The best she can? The best she can?" Katniss screamed at the top of her lungs. "Well, her best isn't good enough! You don't see her going hungry...getting whipped! That woman is sitting in her luxurious Capitol home surrounded by her stuck up Capitol friends puking for shits and giggles while people out here are starving to death! Effie Trinket's **best** sucks!"*

*"Katniss, Effie sends us what she can. That woman could get in a lot of trouble for the things she's done. Those...gifts she sent to us after Gale got hurt..." Peeta defended their escort, but Katniss didn't want to hear it.*

*"Screw Effie Trinket and her stupid gifts!" Katniss picked up the music box that was sitting on the nightstand and hurled it across the room*

*and into the wall. The sound of warped music echoed through the room. "That woman has done nothing for us since then!"*

*"What do you expect her to do?" Peeta turned his head and looked at the shattered pieces of the box. "What has anyone fr..." he walked over to the debris and carefully stepped around it. "What is that?"*

*"What is what?" Katniss yelled at him.*

*"That?" Peeta was pointing to something on the floor.*

*"It's what I think about my gift from Effie!" Katniss found this to be quite humorous and let out an evil laugh, hoping that somehow the woman could hear it thousands of miles away.*

*Peeta began searching the room with his eyes, "Where are my slippers?"*

*"Who gives a shit?" Katniss screamed. "People are starving and all you care about are whether or not your feet are warm? You're just as bad as Effie. No wonder you two get along so well."*

*"I don't want to cut my feet." Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin and said, "I should've known...I really should've known better."*

*Katniss didn't understand any of Peeta's cryptic comments. "You should've known better than to get involved with her. She's shallow...self serving..." Katniss was pacing around the room like a chicken with its head cut off. "...oh and the wigs...seriously Peeta, you should say something to that woman about her attire. Does she really think the giant, orange cotton ball sitting on top of her head is attractive?" Peeta was digging something out of the pile of rubble.*

*"SHUT UP!" Peeta shouted at her. "Please, Katniss." His voice was softer now. "Just shut up," his eyes were pleading with her as he sat on the edge of the bed.*

*"Why?" She was ready, willing and able to fight. Hell, after everything that had been happening in their district and her feelings of helplessness, she was welcoming an argument.*

*"Because we won't be able to hear what Effie sent to us in your music box if you don't be quiet."*

*Katniss froze at Peeta's words. She looked at what he was holding in his fingers and thought it seemed familiar. "What is that?" She snapped at him, not ready to let go of her testiness.*

*"It's a music chip. Well, it's normally used for music, but I don't think that's what's on here," Peeta answered. "So sit down and let's listen."*

*Katniss reluctantly dragged herself to the end of the bed and sat next to Peeta. He pushed a button and the familiar Capitol accent filled their ears.*

*"Hello darling ones. If you're listening to this than Katniss has in fact lived up to my expectations of her. Bravo, Katniss!" Peeta smiled and Katniss dropped her jaw. "I do hope this finds you well...I'm sure you understand my meaning." Peeta wiggled his healed fingers in the air. "Seeing as this is the first time I'm trying something like this, I think I shall keep it simple. We are all missing you around here, but memories of you are being kept afresh in everyone's minds on a daily basis. Katniss your pin is still the highlight of Capitol fashion." Katniss knew Effie was telling her that President Snow was still being reminded of her. "I shall now get to the point. You might be wondering where I thought of the idea for this. It was a combination of thoughts. Peeta you remember our conversation about the piece of furniture I*

own with the compartment and the comparison you made to your school project. Well...voila! Here we are. Now we can communicate with ease. Alas, I feel we should still try to keep our conversations brief and light. Who knows what ships loose lips might sink. I expect to hear from you soon." Peeta laughed and Katniss furrowed her brow wondering what the hell Effie was talking about. "Please tell me if there's anything you or your family needs, Katniss. Peeta, your art supplies will be there shortly, though I'm sure you won't be feeling up to painting for awhile with your injured hand. Make sure to keep it covered at all times dear one. We wouldn't want you to get an infection. Oh, these little recording devices are something aren't they? All you have to do is hold the button down for ten seconds and it erases everything. Twenty seconds and you can record your own message. Remarkable! Give Haymitch my best...if he's sober. Toodle ooh!"

"Effie Trinket, you are absolutely brilliant!" Peeta grasped Katniss' cheeks in his hands and gave her a smack on the lips. "We've got to get to work. I was wondering why she kept sending me so much sugar...Geez..." Peeta was racing down the stairs and for the kitchen. "Come on, Katniss!" He called to her.

She followed on Peeta's heels. "What are we doing?"

"Making candy."

"Candy?" Katniss asked.

"Yup. Lollipops...though I'd like to name them...Capitol suckers." Peeta began taking items out of his pantry. "Man that woman...I can't believe she remembered that."



*"What did she remember?" Katniss felt like she missed half of the message Effie had sent. "I didn't really get what she was saying during some of that."*

*Peeta stopped what he was doing and told her, "Remember in fifth grade there was that contest for the Harvest Festival? They do it every year for the fifth graders. Prim's probably entered it. You know what I'm talking about, right?"*

*"No," Katniss had absolutely **no** clue what he was talking about.*

*"You don't remember that picture you were handed during the mayor's dinner? It was a little poster?"*

*"Nope. The only thing I remember about that dinner was what I saw on television that night."*

*Peeta conceded to her. "Okay...good point. Well there's...God, Katniss. Didn't you ever pay attention in school?"*

*"Why bother? It's not like I had an actual future outside of coal mining," she answered.*

*"Okay...the school holds this contest each year for the Harvest Festival. It's pretty much the only time I've ever been encouraged by my mother to do something creative. Each kid and their immediate family have a chance to win a dinner with the mayor." Peeta gave Katniss a questioning stare. "Madge never told you about the kids that went to her house?"*

*"Nope. Keep going."*

*"Anyway, you needed to think of a creative way to end the Harvest Festival by congratulating the victor of the Hunger Games. Now every*

*year kids would draw pictures...make signs...stuff like that...some wrote poems...sang songs..."*

*"Let me guess, you painted a picture of them slaughtering their last tribute?"*

*"Nope. Everybody was going to be doing something like that, so I thought I'd use my other skill."*

*"You baked the victor a cake?"*

*"I can make more than just cakes, Miss. Everdeen." Peeta said with a smug expression across his face. "I can also make candy. Hard candy."*

*"Whoop-dee-doo," Katniss crossed her arms and said. "I'm tired Peeta and not in the mood for candy." Even though they had gotten a message from Effie, Katniss was still upset with the events that had taken place that day.*

*"Katniss, you're not letting me finish my story. God, you're impatient." Peeta began pulling out pots and racks she had never seen before. "I made the victor a lollipop and when it was eaten, in the center of it was a piece of paper that said congratulations on your victory."*

*"I'm guessing you lost," Katniss said dryly.*

*Peeta glared at her and said, "That's beside the point."*

*"So what **is** the point?"*

*"The point, my dear girl, is..." he held up the tiny recording device in his hand and finished. "...what the Capitol can't see..."*

*"Oh." The light went off in Katniss' head. "Oh! Peeta, we can tell Effie what we need now. Like...what we really need and not just hint over the phone. We can tell them what's going on out here and maybe they can help or...or...Oh, my God! Effie Trinket is brilliant!"*

*They had worked until the wee hours of the morning trying to perfect several trial batches of candy. Well, Peeta made candy and Katniss critiqued it. It was important for it to be dark enough to hold the little chip, but not so dark that it would cause suspicion. Plus it had to taste good on the off chance that someone popped one in their mouth. When they were satisfied with their results Peeta and Katniss tested the device. They made a couple of recordings, hid it in the candy then smashed it open. The device withstood all of it. They had decided to tell Haymitch about it the next day and then they'd make a recording for Effie and send it off. By the time Katniss and Peeta went up to bed they were beat.*

*Katniss saw the remnants of Effie's gift to her, strewn about the floor. "She knew I'd destroy it," she said quietly to Peeta. "Am I that bad, Peeta?"*

*"No, Katniss. Effie just knows you'd hate something like that. I think that's why she sent it." He ran his hand down her hair. "I knew there was something off about her gift to you. Especially the title of the song, Beautiful Dreamer."*

*Katniss could feel the tears burning in the back of her nose and her throat closing up. "I said such horrible things about her."*

*"You didn't mean them, Katniss."*

*"She saved your hand, Peeta. If she hadn't sent that medication, you would never be able to do the things you did tonight...never be able to paint...I was so horrible to her...said such mean things about her..."*

*Katniss began crying and though she tried to stop, she couldn't. While she and Peeta were washing pieces of candy down the drain earlier, they couldn't exactly give it away to people without them asking why they were made, children...their own neighbors, were starving to death and instead of blaming the Capitol, Katniss had taken it out on Effie, their greatest ally in the Capitol. Katniss didn't know how long she had spent shedding tears. Peeta hadn't tried to stop them either. He simply lifted her up and held her in his lap allowing her to cleanse herself of the events that had taken place since they had won the Games. At one point her body had been jerking, almost convulsing from the force of her cries. She began yelling out and screaming, "I hate that bastard, Snow! Hate him! I want him dead!" Then she'd start crying again. Her outbursts between sobs happened over and over again until finally Peeta placed her head on his pillow. She felt the warm washcloth against her face, heard him squeezing out the cloth in a basin full of water next to her, and then begin wiping her neck, her hands. He disappeared then came back to her and took off her shirt, then pants and put a fresh nightshirt on her, never once dropping his eyes from her own. He gathered her clothes and dumped them in a corner with his then changed and joined her in bed.*

*Peeta took her in his arms and whispered to her. "You've had a long night. Sleep, Katniss. We'll clean up tomorrow."*

Katniss peeked out from beneath her hair and saw the mess on the floor. "Ugh! Look at that."

"You look at it...better yet, go get the broom and dustpan and clean that crap up, because I'm not going to do it."

"What am I going to say to Effie?" Katniss looked at the shattered pieces of the music box her escort had sent to her as a gift. "You know

she'll want to know what prompted the destruction of that wretched thing."

"You're going to have to explain your little tantrum." Katniss glared at him over her shoulder. "Okay," Peeta corrected himself, "Big tantrum. Huge...gigantic...*enormous* tantrum."

"All right. That's enough out of you." She smiled at him amazed at how easily he could make her face her demons and literally laugh at herself. "You better go and wake Haymitch."

Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch spent the day preparing Effie's gift even though the package was addressed to Cinna and Portia. There were a dozen hard candies and a dozen soft ones as well as a batch of cookies Peeta had made. The letter they had sent was a simple thank you note for working so hard on their wedding attire. When they brought it to the train to be delivered, sure enough a Peacekeeper took a random piece of each treat and ate it to "check for authenticity." Katniss didn't know what Effie could do about the circumstances they were facing; all she knew was that the woman was nothing if not resourceful.

Dinner was eaten as it usually was Katniss, her family, Peeta and Haymitch around Katniss' kitchen table. Haymitch offered to clean the kitchen volunteering Katniss as his aid, much to her dismay. As they dried the last of the plates, Haymitch pulled her to the side and slipped something in her hand.

"What's this?" She asked.

"It's a gift," he whispered softly. "Thought you might want to give it to the boy."

Katniss lifted the heavy gold trinket in the palm of her hand and looked down at it. "This is lovely. Where did you get it?"

"It was my grandfather's," Haymitch didn't go into any other details, but he didn't have to. Katniss could tell from what was engraved in the gold exactly where the locket came from and that it had a matching pin to go with it...a mockingjay pin his grandmother wore.

That night when Katniss went to bed, she slept at her own house. She needed to think some things through and she couldn't do it lying next to Peeta. The piece of jewelry Haymitch had given to her left her with questions and it was time to come up with some answers. She got up, dug through her drawer, taking out the carefully wrapped locket and picked up her mockingjay pin. She studied the locket, tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. She placed both items in the palm of her hand and pressed them together, feeling the warmth of the gold heat up against her skin. That's when she saw it...the significance the two pieces of jewelry held. Alone they were beautiful. Together, they were one.

Katniss went back to bed with the image of the locket and pin seared into her head. She tossed and turned allowing her mind access to the most intimate details of her relationship with Peeta. Scrutinizing it bit by bit. She even revisited her and Gale's kiss, wondering if she could remember the feel of his lips or if the only thing she could recall was how wrong the kiss had felt. Giving Peeta the locket wouldn't just be taken as a nice gesture on her part and she knew it. They'd both know it. Haymitch had most certainly known it when he gave her his grandfather's token.

Katniss hadn't meant to pull away from Peeta over the course of the next few days, but she had. He continually asked her what was wrong, to which she'd give him a peck on the cheek and a standard,

"nothing," but everything was wrong. Katniss found herself at that point in her life where she had to come to terms with her own emotional insecurities.

One morning she woke before dawn and headed for the one place that was strictly forbidden now, even more so than before. She hadn't dreamt of her father in months, but he had been invading her dreams for almost a week straight. Something inside of her yearned to say goodbye to her and her father's special place. It was there, she knew, she could find the answers to the questions that had been plaguing her. As she made her trek through the forest she took in everything around her, the sounds...scents, storing it in a memory bank, knowing in the depths of her heart that she'd never return to this place again. She patted her bow and arrows several times, wishing she could take them with her when she left the woods, hating that she'd have to leave them...such an intricate part of her life behind. The closer she got to her destination the more she missed her father...the more she feared the answers to her questions. She had expected to see the little abandoned cottage next to the lake; she had planned to lunch there. What she hadn't expected to find was a Peacekeeper holding an image of her mockingjay staring back at her.

# **Catching Fire:**

# **Rekindling Chapter**

# **11, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Ten: Nightmares do Come True**

**Previously Katniss went into the woods to clear her head. Haymitch admitted to himself that Effie and he had a secret friendship for years that no one knew about.**

**Thank you one and all for reading this story. I try my hardest to write something that will please all of you as well as myself, because if I'm not happy with it, then it goes in the trash bin. Trust me, my betas know this for a fact. It's good to know that there are people out there that actually look forward to my updates. Sometimes I get a bit...blah and your words of encouragement motivate me beyond belief. So thank you! S and A, you two are the best betas EVER! Now it's time to kick back and find out what's happening in the next chapter of...**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**As Katniss made her way towards the lake her father had taken her to as a young girl she decided to start off with the easy portions of her life. She found it strange thinking of Gale as something simple in her life, but compared to the rest of what she was dealing with, he was.**



Where Gale had once been a huge factor in her world, now he had made himself scarce and Katniss didn't like it. She wasn't sure if he was still harboring feelings of love towards her or if it was as simple as Rory's signing up for the tesserae, not that signing up for it was an easy thing to do, but Katniss vowed that she would no longer allow Gale to keep her at arms length. She missed her friend. They may not have been able to go hunting anymore, but there was still plenty they could do. Gale had been her confidant for many years and she missed that aspect of their relationship. If he had been available, Katniss was certain she'd be talking to him about her dilemma with Peeta and their wedding and not making a trip out to the lake. The one thing Katniss refused to believe was that Gale was like the rest of the district and keeping his distance because of the whipping. That much she knew he wouldn't do. 'On Sunday, you'll stop by his house and talk to him whether he likes it or not. Okay, Katniss,' she thought to herself. 'One problem down. How many more to go?'

The rebellion was next on her mind. She knew where she stood when it came to her beliefs, however, Peeta was right about one thing, the punishments that had happened in other districts hadn't happened in District Twelve. Not until they won their Games and an uprising started. Katniss wanted to take more action. Try and start their own uprising in Twelve, but she didn't know how. 'You'll have to talk to Haymitch about that one,' she thought. 'Can't do much about the rebellion until you speak to him so might as well shelve that for now. Okay. Another problem down. One more to go.'

"Peeta," she paused her walking and breathed his name out into the winter's air. Peeta wasn't a problem, but getting married very well could be. Her whole life she had been against it. She had refused to get married because she never wanted to be dependent on a man for anything like her mother had been. As far as Katniss was concerned, all she really needed in her life was food and shelter and she could

easily provide both of those things for herself. An emotional need...attachment to a man was something she had never desired in her life. Opening herself up to that would be like opening herself up to all the pain her mother had gone through. Her mother had practically gone into a catatonic state after her father died. It had taken Katniss awhile to understand how her mother had let herself get to that point, but Katniss did. She understood it all too well and it scared the living hell out of her.

Being in love with Peeta was something Katniss was sure she had dealt with already. She had accepted the fact that she had given her heart to him, but it wasn't her heart she was worried about...it was her future. Their children's futures, for Katniss knew that there was no way they'd avoid having a child no matter how many precautions they took. She could imagine President Snow ordering them to have a child and that child being reaped at the ripe old age of twelve just like Prim had been. But Peeta had said, if they had a baby, they'd raise it like a Career. 'And what kind of life would that be for a child?' She asked herself. 'What kind of life do any of these kids have? At least your kid would stand a shot at winning, not like most of the kids that come from our district,' she thought to herself. Still, the thought wasn't comforting. It made her ill wondering which of Prim's schoolmates she'd be mentoring for the Quarter Quell. Katniss had to push that from her mind in order to continue addressing the issues at hand. Her upcoming wedding, the possibility of children and spending her life with Peeta Mellark.

When she thought about him...Peeta, a small smile automatically lifted at the corner of her lips. 'How can you love someone so much and be so confused all at the same time?' She wondered. She began going through his traits one by one in her mind. 'He sees you for who you are even when you try to hide it from him. He doesn't put up with your shit, which really pisses you off...though he loves it when you get

pissed off,' this thought brought a bigger smile to her face. 'Probably why he doesn't put up with your shit. He refuses to let you take care of yourself. Now that one really bugs the hell out of me,' she thought. 'He always thinks I need protecting yet he's the one that got whipped. He's the one that got cut by Cato's sword.' She failed to see that she always tried to protect him too. 'He takes care of your sister and your mother like they were his own flesh and blood. Better than his own flesh and blood ever took care of him.' One by one she began going down each of his good and bad points. 'He snores. He never wakes you when he has a nightmare. He took care of Gale. He loves you. He's an expert liar. He loves you. He can talk you into just about anything. Yeah...I hate that. He loves you. He told you you'd have to propose to him. He loves you. You know he's expecting you to propose before you actually get married? He loves you. Do you love him as much as he loves you? Because he loves you with every ounce of his being. He was willing to die for you and when you went into those Games you were only too happy to let him. So, Katniss? What's your answer? Do you love him as much as he loves you?' Katniss jumped when she heard the click of the weapon behind her. Pure instinct and years of hunting had her reaching for her arrow, drawing back on the bow, facing her target and taking aim on the Peacekeeper that stood only a few yards in front of her.

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Peeta walked into Katniss' house with a loaf of cinnamon raisin bread, he had stopped knocking on their door several weeks ago, and greeted his new family with a smile. "Good morning," he called out to Prim and Evelyn as they stood in the kitchen preparing their breakfast.

"Morning, Peeta," Prim smiled at him. "Is Katniss still asleep?"

"I don't know. Should I go and see?" He asked as he sat the bread on the counter and began taking out plates for their breakfast.

"Didn't she spend the night at your house?" Her mother asked.

"No," Peeta wished she had spent the night at his house. He missed her. She had been so distant lately. 'They think she slept at your house,' he thought to himself. He turned around and gave them a curious look. "She hasn't spent the night at my house in over a week." They all stood there staring at one another, questioning each other with their eyes. A surge of panic rushed through Peeta. Thoughts of Peacekeepers coming into their home and taking her from a dead sleep shot through his mind. He dropped the plates on the counter and ran up the stairs calling out her name. "Katniss! Katniss!"

"She's not here, Peeta," Prim followed him. "Mom and I looked for her when we woke up this morning. That's why we thought she was at your house."

"Maybe she's at Haymitch's?" Peeta tried not to sound too worried. He didn't want to upset Prim. "Or she could've gone into town to pick up some things."

"Maybe," there was concern in Prim's voice.

"I'm going to Haymitch's," Peeta declared as he walked down the stairs. She had to be there. Where else could she have gone?

"Haymitch isn't answering his phone," Evelyn said as she replaced the receiver. "I thought maybe she stopped by his house..."

"I'll check." Peeta put his coat back on and looked at the two of his girls standing in the kitchen with their arms around each other. "Don't worry. She's probably just visiting Haymitch. You know how she loves

to wake him up in the morning and give him grief," he winked at Prim and gave her a small smile. Katniss hated waking Haymitch up and she refused to do it in the morning because it was close to impossible to do so. "I'll be right back."

Peeta walked even though he wanted to run to Haymitch's house knowing that Katniss' mother and sister were probably watching him out their window. He entered the man's home to find Hazelle preparing some breakfast for him.

"Good morning, Peeta. Nice to see you," Hazelle greeted him.

"Morning, Hazelle." Peeta walked in and glanced around the living room. "Um...Hazelle?" He turned to her. "Have you seen Katniss this morning?"

"No."

"She didn't come here? Maybe she got here before you did?" he asked. His insides were trembling as he waited for Hazelle's answer.

"I've been here going on an hour now and I haven't seen her." Hazelle wiped her hands off on a dishtowel. "Was that you that called? I couldn't get to the phone."

Peeta ignored her question and asked one of his own. "Is anyone at your house? Maybe she went there?" Peeta was hoping she would say yes.

"The kids are still there, but they'll be off to school shortly. Why?" Hazelle plated up some food and set it on the table.

"No reason," Peeta didn't want to worry her, but the fact was he was terrified. It wasn't like Katniss to just up and leave without letting

anyone know where she was going. "I'm just going to go up and say hi to Haymitch."

"Good. I hate waking him up to eat. Hazelle began cleaning up the pan she had used to prepare breakfast. "Might as well take his plate with you. He'll just go back to sleep after he eats anyway."

Peeta took the platter of bacon and eggs upstairs to Haymitch's room and looked around his house at the same time. He set the plate down on his mentor's nightstand and pulled open the curtains. "Wake up!" There was no easy way to get the man out of bed. "Now, Haymitch!"

"What the hell, boy?" Haymitch scratched his stomach and rolled over. "I'm sleeping."

"Have you seen Katniss?"

"Not since yesterday," Haymitch pulled a pillow over his head.

"Haymitch, she's not home. She's not here. She's not at my house and Hazelle would've told me if she saw her." The bad feeling Peeta had in his gut was now turning into pure panic. He had felt this feeling once before. The day he woke up in the cave and seen Katniss passed out in a pool of her own blood. He was petrified she'd never wake up again.

"So what? The girl's allowed to have some time to herself." Haymitch sat up and threw the pillow at him then flopped back down. "Shut the damn curtains."

"Haymitch, do you think Katniss would've gone somewhere without telling me or her family first?" Peeta asked.

It took about a minute for Haymitch to answer. "Maybe she went to town...could've gone to pick up some supplies for her mom or something." He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at his clock. "Shit. Did you see how early it was?"

"Yes. Not many shops open this early." Peeta knew he couldn't hide the fear in his eyes from his mentor.

Haymitch looked at the plate of food and said, "Maybe she went to see Gale?"

"I asked Hazelle if she had seen her. She said no."

"Look, kid. I wouldn't worry. Give her a couple of hours. Maybe she just needed to get some air...take a walk..."

"Yeah. Sure," Peeta said dejectedly. "Hazelle made your breakfast for you," he said as he walked out. He had no clue why Haymitch wasn't as worried as he was about Katniss' missing status. He wanted to shake some sense into the man. Scream at him. Tell him the Peacekeepers could've come and snatched her from her bed on Snow's orders. Surely Haymitch knew these things.

Peeta walked back into Katniss' house and shook his head. "He hasn't seen her and neither has Hazelle." He had to keep himself as calm as possible for their sake. No matter what was going on inside of his head, he couldn't let them see it.

"Well, I'm sure she's around here somewhere. She can't just disappear into thin air." Her mother said.

"Prim, why don't you eat your breakfast and get ready for school. I'll walk you," Peeta suggested.

"Go upstairs and get dressed, sweetie." Her mother gave her a little pat. Once she was out of the room she asked Peeta, "Where are you going to look?"

"I'll check your old house...stop by Gale's just in case Hazelle missed her...I'll come back and check in with you after that. If she shows up, make sure she stays here. Don't let her go out looking for me."

Peeta had walked Prim to school and headed to Katniss' house in the Seam. He walked through it calling out her name and checked for her old hunting clothes. He felt a slight surge of relief when he found them still hanging in the closet alongside of her father's jacket. He was tempted to leave a note for her, but something inside of him said it was a bad idea so he left, but not before placing one of his gloves on the table. If she showed up there then she'd know he had been there. If someone else showed up, they'd overlook it. He walked to Hazelle's house and knocked on the door only to receive no answer. "Where the hell are you, Katniss?" He whispered to himself. He swung by Madge's house on the off chance that she was home from school and Katniss was there, but he struck out once again. He headed back to Katniss' house in Victor's Village and walked slowly through town, checking the shops through their windows as he walked by them. As the day progressed his heart sank further and further into the pit of his stomach.

"Hey," he stomped his boots on the ground and took his coat off. "Is she back yet?" Peeta asked Haymitch and Evelyn who were sitting at Katniss' kitchen table.

"Nope," Haymitch answered.

Peeta walked to the phone and called his house, hoping she'd pick up the phone, but it simply rang and rang. "She didn't stop by your place at all?" He asked Haymitch.



"Haven't seen her, kid and Hazelle's keeping an eye out for her," he answered.

"Peeta, sit down and warm up," Evelyn poured him a cup of tea.

"I'm fine. Maybe she went to Sae's place," Peeta suggested. "I'll take a walk out there."

"Warm up first, kid." Haymitch said to him. "You've been out there for hours. Can't imagine your hand's feeling too good."

Peeta hadn't realized that he'd been making a fist over and over again with his hand. "My fingers are a bit numb."

"Let me have a look," Evelyn patted some life back into it. "Sit by the fire and warm them up. I'll make you something to eat and then you can leave again."

Peeta reluctantly agreed. As he stared into the blazing fire he could feel the sense of dread looming overhead. "Something's wrong," he whispered to Haymitch who had taken up a spot next to him. "I just know it."

"Think they came for her?" Peeta knew Haymitch was talking about the Peacekeepers.

He shrugged and fought back the tears that threatened to come with images of Katniss being tortured by Head Peacekeeper, Thread while he sat, idly by, in front of a fire eating a sandwich. He put the plate down, his appetite gone, and said, "I need to go look for her." He looked at the clock and wondered where the morning had gone. It was already one in the afternoon.

Peeta put his coat and boots back on then Katniss mother asked, "Where are your gloves?"

"I lost one," he answered. "Think I dropped it somewhere."

"Go get another pair before you head out. We don't need you getting frostbite." Evelyn pulled his scarf around his neck and said reassuringly, "You'll find her."

Peeta looked at Haymitch and said, "Can you pick up Prim from school? I don't want her walking home alone."

"Not a problem, kid."

Peeta stopped by his house and found his woolen mittens as well as an extra pair of gloves. He pulled his mittens over his hands, shoved the gloves in his pocket, closed his eyes and let out a breath. "Damn it, Katniss!" He yelled out his frustrations for his own benefit. Peeta was sure that his nightmares had finally come true. One had for certain...he couldn't find Katniss.

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Katniss made her way back from the lake through the woods. She had been out there much longer than she had expected and knew her family would be worried about her. She was certain her disappearance was going to cause a huge fight between her and Peeta, but she couldn't think about that. All she kept thinking about were the two women she came upon in the woods. Bonnie and Twill.

Stumbling upon a Peacekeeper at the lake was a shocker for Katniss. Finding out they weren't the Capitol's guards but refugees from District

Eight and heading to District Thirteen nearly floored her. The things they had said took Katniss by surprise. The uprising in Eight had ended quickly. Thousands of Peacekeepers had been shuttled into their district and put an abrupt halt to the fighting. People had been locked in their homes, forbidden to leave for any reason for a week. No one had access to food or coal and just as the district was on the brink of starvation, the order to return to work came and it was business as usual. When the bombs hit the factory, that produced Peacekeeper uniforms, Bonnie and Twill had been running late for their shifts. Their tardiness had saved their lives. Katniss thought about the older woman telling her about the uprising and how the people in their district had been planning it for awhile, but it wasn't until she and Peeta had taken a stand against the Capitol during their Games that everything seemed to fall into place. Katniss thought of the small wafer they had showed her with the imprint of her mockingjay on it. They told her that it was the symbol of the rebellion. That they were on hers and Peeta's side. 'Hers and Peeta's side,' she thought to herself. 'Have we really become the faces of the rebellion?' She knew how important their actions in the arena had been to the rebellion, saw the people of Eight holding up signs with their images on them, but actually hearing the women talk to Katniss as though she were a great leader... Katniss shook her head in disbelief. 'Some leader you are, Katniss,' she thought to herself. 'You spent your days planning a wedding while the people in District Eight sacrificed their lives.' As Katniss got closer to the fence that she began wondering about District Thirteen. The Capitol had said it was destroyed, but had it been? Bonnie and Twill mentioned television footage of Thirteen. They were sure the Capitol kept using the same thing over and over again because of a mockingjay's wing that appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. 'If that's what they're basing their hopes on,' Katniss thought. 'It's pretty weak.' Still Katniss' felt her curiosity peek at the thought of it.

Her initial plan for the day had been to spend some time by the lake and think about the course of her life. They had barely heard anything about the rebellion lately, simply that it was still moving forward, but nothing specific. She and Gale hadn't spoken in weeks, which Katniss had decided she needed to remedy. And then there was her wedding, which was rapidly approaching. She had addressed those topics as she made her walk towards the lake, but was so caught up in her own thoughts she didn't notice the telltale signs that surrounded her. The smoke coming from the little cabin, the fresh footprints in the snow, the smell of freshly burning pine. It wasn't until she heard the click of the gun that Katniss had finally realized she wasn't alone in the woods.

Katniss shook her head out, her body was covered in sweat from the snowsuit Cinna had designed for her, but her face was like ice. She thought of her friend in the Capitol. Phone calls from Cinna were made to her several times a week. Katniss always held onto the hope that he'd hint at something about the mood of the districts, anything that would give her some type of hope that President Snow would soon be falling from grace, but their calls were always about dresses and her upcoming nuptials. Most of the time she found discussions of the wedding to be a bit grating. Her whole life had been turned into something she had never planned. She never wanted to be a bride...never wanted to be a wife, but if she was going to get married, Peeta was definitely the man she'd want to spend her life with. That much she knew.

She had answered many questions that day, but the main one. 'You're getting married whether you like it or not. The question still remains...do you want to marry Peeta?' She could live with getting married, but before she said, I do, she wanted to know if, in fact, she really did. There was still something festering away at her insides, about their wedding. She knew it had nothing to do with Peeta and everything to do with the locket that Haymitch had given her. What it

stood for. 'In a way...it does have to do with Peeta,' she thought to herself. 'Why is this so hard for you, Katniss?' She asked herself. 'Because admitting you actually want to get married is like saying your whole life...everything you ever believed in was a...lie.'

The closer she got to the fence the darker the sky got. As she made her way out of the thick brush towards her exit she saw a familiar form standing on the other side of it and then she heard the loud buzzing sound that reminded her of the tracker jacker's nest. She felt panic coursing through her veins as she realized the fence had been turned on.

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Effie rewound the video of the second Quarter Quell and paused it. She stared at the young girl's image, blond hair, blue eyes, pretty smile and quite handy with a little blow gun she had turned into a deadly weapon by dipping the darts into poison then blowing them into her fellow tributes. Maysilee Donner was definitely someone Effie would've liked to have known. She had watched the girl's death countless times over the years. It never really bothered her until this year. This year...no matter how many times she watched the tape, her death never got any easier.

Effie knew how the story for the original star-crossed lovers would end and the lasting effects it would leave on one of them. She paused the scene on her television screen and felt her heart breaking for the umpteenth time. 'I wonder if anyone knew how much you loved her, Haymitch?' she asked herself. Effie stared at the younger image of Haymitch on her television screen. She could see the pain in his eyes; this was the moment Haymitch Abernathy lost everything. She had often wondered what could turn a man like him to alcoholism. He had

told her though. Effie was sure he hadn't remembered as he was drunk out of his mind at the time, but she remembered every last word.

*"For the love of...My word, Haymitch! Must you constantly drink yourself into oblivion the moment you get on a tribute train?" Effie screamed at him. "You have two young people that are counting on you to help them with these Games." She walked up to him as he sat in the bar car of the train, face down on the table. "Sick," she mumbled. "You make me sick."*

*"Effie...you should really reconsider wearing those wigs. You look like a cotton swab," Haymitch laughed as though he had told the funniest joke in the world.*

*"Yes. Yes. I'm a cotton swab." She lifted him up by the arm. "Come on; let's get you to your room before you pass out."*

*"No." He stood up and weaved to the side. "I'm not done drinking yet."*

*Effie reached for the bottle he was holding onto with a death grip in his hand above his head. "You are if you want me to help you get into bed."*

*Haymitch's arm wrapped around her waist. "Ever wondered why we haven't slept together, Effie?"*

*"Not really," she pursed her lips. "I'd say it's blatantly obvious. You're not attracted to swabs of cotton and I'm not a fan of men who think vomit is the newest in fashion trends." Haymitch grabbing a hold of her in private was nothing new. She had grown accustomed to it over the years, but he always apologized to her before falling asleep and she knew he never meant anything by it. Compared to some of the men at the Capitol, Haymitch was as mild mannered as a mouse. She*

*reached up and yanked the bottle out of his hand. "Ha!" She slipped from his grip easily. "Now...you can either come with me, or I can call an attendant." She knew how much he hated the hired hands the Capitol provided for them on their trips, plus she didn't want anyone at the Capitol to find out she couldn't control her mentor. "Which is it?"*

*"Why do you always have to take the fun out of everything, Trinkie?"*

*"I hate it when you call me that." Effie reached for the phone. "I'll call an attendant if you're going to be an ass." It was an empty threat, but she made it regardless.*

*"No," Haymitch let out an alarmingly loud belch that Effie was afraid would be followed up with a pool of vomit. Fortunately it wasn't. "Effie..." Haymitch looked a bit green. "I think I need some air."*

*She slammed down the bottle of whiskey and said, "You know Haymitch, I have better things to do with my time than play nursemaid to you." She put her arm around his waist and began walking to the last train car. "Wait a moment." She peeked her head out the door to make sure no one was coming. "All right," she said in a sing song voice. "Upsy daisy."*

*Haymitch's head bobbed around as she led him to the final compartment and fell back on the sofa cushion as she plopped him down in the seat. "Open the window, will ya?"*

*"Why do I allow myself to get into these situations with you every year?" Effie began talking to herself. "If I had a brain I'd give up this job and become a...a..."*

*"A...a..." Haymitch mocked her. "A what?"*

*The sour look on Effie's face said that anything would be more preferable than being an escort alongside of him. "Haymitch, I must insist that you curb your alcohol consumption. I simply cannot continue to do this year after year." She saw his head fall to the side and stare out the window. "Why, Haymitch? Why do you do this to yourself? To me?"*

*"It was seventeen years ago today." Haymitch looked at her. "Seventeen years ago. Did you know that?"*

*Effie racked her brain trying to think of what could've occurred seventeen years ago. "Your own reaping?"*

*"Mine and...hers. I met her that morning. We weren't supposed to, but I was pretty good at doing things I wasn't supposed to do back then," Haymitch grinned absently. "There's no school on Reaping Day, so we knew our secret place would be safe."*

*Effie sat down in an empty seat across from him and just listened. It was the most coherent thing he had ever said to her. "We talked about it...if one of us got our names picked. We both thought it'd be me since my name was in there so many times and there was gonna be twice as many tributes that year. We even made a joke about it. I told her not to worry...if they called me, I'd win because I was smarter than everybody else...didn't matter how many tributes I'd be up against they'd all be stupid."*

*Effie smiled at Haymitch saying that because she was sure that was exactly how he'd won his Games.*

*"Then she said, 'What if they call both of us, Haymitch? What do we do then?'" Haymitch ran his hand down his face and said, "I was so stupid, Effie. I told her if that happened to pretend like she didn't know me. That the other tributes would use it against us in the arena. I don't*



*know...maybe they would've. In the end it didn't matter. None of it mattered." Haymitch looked at Effie and said, "Why do I drink so much?" He waited and said, "Because Maysilee is dead and I'm alive. Because I didn't have the balls to die for the girl that I loved. Because I'm half a man, Effie...if that." Haymitch closed his eyes and fell asleep murmuring, "I'm sorry Maysee. I'm sorry."*

*Even after his confession to her, Effie still questioned his alcoholism. She couldn't believe that a boy so young could truly comprehend what love was. Never having experienced it herself, Effie didn't see how a teenager could know the emotion so well. So she continued to harp at him about his drinking and continued to help him through it in private so she wouldn't be chastised by anyone at the Capitol for not doing her job. Then one night, Effie watched the tape of the Quarter Quell. The first viewing she simply got caught up in the Games. The second time she watched it she rooted for Haymitch, even though she knew the outcome. The third time she paid close attention to his fellow tribute partner, Maysilee Donner, admiring the girl's quick thinking. After that she studied the tape, looking for signs of their relationship.*

Effie shut the television off and ran her hand along the outer edge of the remote control. She had never picked up on any signs on Haymitch and Maysilee's love for one another in the arena until this past year. That's when she saw the little things. The looks Haymitch would give Maysilee, the smiles she would bestow upon him the way they went out of their way to avoid touching one another, how hard it was for Maysilee to walk away from Haymitch and break their alliance and her death... Effie sighed as she thought about the child's death. Haymitch holding the girl's hand and staring into her eyes, watching the life drain from hers. Each time Effie watched Maysilee Donner die she could see Haymitch die right along with her. She thanked her lucky stars that Katniss hadn't left the arena without Peeta. If she had,

Effie was certain Katniss would have a future like Haymitch's. Alone and miserable. She'd never forgive herself for being alive.

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Peeta had searched everywhere he could think of for Katniss, but before heading back to her house, he thought he'd stop by the bakery on the off chance that she might have gone there. He walked to the backdoor of it, avoiding the front entrance due to the Peacekeepers he saw inside of his parent's shop.

He quietly opened the door and heard his mother's voice. "We haven't seen either one of them, but you can be certain that I'll let you know if either one of them steps foot into this shop. Did you know he moved into that mansion and left us to live in this hovel?" Peeta closed his eyes for a brief moment. He was disgusted with his mother's constant complaining. He decided to leave before she found him there and turned him in, but before he could his father rounded the corner and saw him. His mother continued her diatribe from the front of the shop. "I've got no love for that girl he's going to marry." His dad made a motion with his fingers as though telling Peeta to move to the side. "Once a Seam brat, always a Seam brat." His father grabbed a rack with some bread on it and went to the front of the store. "Like I said, either one of them shows up here...we'll let you know," Peeta's mother said.

Peeta stood in a corner in the back of the bakery between some cake pans and boxes. He couldn't believe what was happening. Peacekeepers were now on the hunt for him and Katniss and his mother was more than willing to turn them in.

"Your mother and brothers are still out front," his father said to him as he walked up to Peeta.

"What did the Peacekeepers want with me and Katniss?" Peeta asked.

"Don't know. Don't care," he said. "But I'll be damned if I'm helping them find my own son. Now, I don't know where Katniss is, but you better find her before they do."

Peeta nodded his head and went for the backdoor. "Thanks, dad."

"Go on now," his father opened the door up and peeked outside to make sure no one was there. "Coast is clear."

Peeta waited by the back of the bakery and watched as the Peacekeepers made their way out of town and headed towards Victor's Village. Now he knew they didn't have Katniss. The problem was, neither did he. He had searched the entire district for her and couldn't find any sign of her, which meant only one thing. She wasn't in their district...she was in the woods. He tried not to be angry with her as he made his way to the entrance by her old house in the Seam, but he was. He was furious. He had spent his entire day worried sick about her thinking the worst had happened. Now he knew she had just taken off without even thinking about how it would affect the people around her. Several times he had ducked into doorways, taking cover when he thought he saw the flash of the familiar white uniforms the Peacekeepers wore. He had decided to give her one more hour. It was getting dark out and he knew Katniss wouldn't risk staying in the woods after dark. Even she was smarter than that. Then again, after what had happened to Gale, he was sure she was smart enough to stay out of the woods all together and he was pretty sure he was wrong about that too.

Peeta clenched his fists in his jacket pocket over and over again, trying to get the blood flowing through his numb fingertips, as he stood in the cold next to the opening in the fence. He had taken shelter between a tree and an old shack that had been someone's home, once upon a time, but was now two walls and a collapsed roof. If the structure hadn't had snow piled on top of it and wasn't full of dangerous debris, he would've hidden inside of it. The threat of the roof collapsing was too great though.

'Come on, Katniss,' he thought to himself. 'Get the hell out of there.' He looked through the fence for any sign of her and considered checking her old house one more time. The hour he had decided to give her had come and gone. Then he heard it. A vivacious humming sound which could only mean one thing. The fence that separated their district from the woods had been turned on. If Katniss was in the forbidden forest, she'd be trapped there. Peeta's insides began to tremble with fear once again, he was sure his legs were going to give out. He looked through the trees behind the fence, keeping a safe distance and saw something move.

"Katniss?" He whispered loudly. "Katniss?"

She was cloaked from head to toe in dark winter apparel, but her silver eyes shone through the thick and met his. "Peeta," she said softly.

They stood there staring at one another. A tall metal fence buzzing with enough electrical current to kill anyone who dare touch it standing between them.

Katniss was surrounded by bushes, pine and barren trees. Peeta by the worn down homes of District Twelve. Darkness engulfed them, not only on the outside, but on the inside of their beings.

Peeta took a step closer to the fence and saw a mixture of fear and pleading in Katniss' eyes as she moved closer to him. They were all of three feet apart, but it might as well have been miles. Peeta lifted a hand as if to touch her and she lifted hers back.

"Peeta," there was a quiver in her voice.

"Katniss," he sighed.

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 12, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Eleven: Answers**

**This is purely a K/P fluffernutter, but for good reasons I promise. Next chapter will be full of all sorts of POV's. I'm very excited because we're coming up to the Quell! Yay! I do hope you like this chapter. I really enjoyed writing this one. Your reviews as**

**always are appreciated. Thank you to S and A for everything.  
Now let's stop wasting time and get on with...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Peeta stood staring at Katniss through the electrified fence, feeling completely helpless. "I don't know what to do," all of the anger he had felt, only moments ago, towards her going into the woods was replaced with anxiety over getting her out of there.

"I'm not sure," Katniss looked around trying to consider her options. "I can't go under it. I'll get fried."

"How about over it?" Peeta suggested.

Katniss took in the height of the fence. "That's a long drop...but better than the alternative."

Peeta nodded his head at her. "Is there a tree that goes over it?"

"I think I can jump onto that old house..." Katniss made a gesture with her chin at the broken down shack Peeta had been hiding next to.

"No," he quickly said. "It's too dangerous. That roof's caved in. If you jump..." he shook his head. "No. We'll have to find another spot, Katniss."

She looked at the old house and noticed broken pieces of glass, splintered wood and rusty nails everywhere. "Yeah, I can't take my chances on that place." She turned away from it. "Um..." she looked further down the fence line. "You've got a better view of the overhangs. Can you point out a tree to me?"

Peeta stepped back and saw one several yards away. "Down this way," he turned and began walking, but she couldn't stay at his side. If

she had been seen, she'd be in trouble. He strolled down the length of the fence listening to the sounds of her feet crunching through snow, brush and branches. They didn't dare hold a conversation between them for fear of someone hearing her on the restricted side of the fence and turning her in. When Peeta reached an area he thought would work he stopped and carefully scanned his surroundings. "Katniss?"

"I'm here," she called to him from a few feet above him.

He couldn't help but to lift the corner of his mouth in a grin when he saw that she had already made it partially up the tree. "There's a snow bank over here that should cushion your fall."

"I see it," Katniss looked down at him from her spot in the tree and saw the pile of fresh snow that had built up throughout the day. "Stand back, Peeta." She was at least two feet above the fence, but she still had to climb out over it and onto the District Twelve side.

"Don't jump into it. I'll try to catch you," his eyes met hers up in the tree.

She nodded as she scurried to the end of the branch, holding her breath as she went over the electrified structure. She sat at the end of the branch and looked both ways. "No one's coming, but...Peeta...this is pretty high."

He looked up at her and held her gaze. "Do you trust me?"

She didn't even have to think. "With my life."

"Then jump. I'll catch you, Katniss." Peeta shook his hand out willing the feeling to come back into his fingers. All he wanted to do was

catch her, take her in his arms and never let her go. "Come on, sweetheart. You can do this," his tone was desperate and full of love.

She arched her brown and glared down at him. "Peeta?"

"Yeah." He held his arms out for her. He had expected her to tell him she loved him...that she was sorry for what she had done that day. Instead, she said something completely Katniss.

"Don't call me sweetheart," she let go of the branch and jumped into his waiting arms with a scowl on her face.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't control his fingers, the whip's lasting effect on his hand had been plaguing him even more with the cold weather, and he felt her body slipping through his hands as they landed in the snow bank, unfortunately with her body underneath his taking the brunt of the impact.

"Ow!" Katniss felt the smack of the pavement slam against the heel of her foot and her backside.

"You okay?" Peeta asked as he sat upright and began looking her over for injuries.

"I'm fine." Katniss' eyes flashed to the woods and back to Peeta. Within seconds their arms were wrapped around each other and their lips peppered the other with feverish kisses.

"I didn't know where you were," Peeta's voice was hoarse and filled with urgency.

"I just wanted to go to the lake once more. I thought..." Katniss had too many thoughts going through her head to expound any further.



"You shouldn't have risked it," Peeta gave her several hard and frantic kisses. "You should've told me where you were going."

"I'm sorry." She felt horrible for worrying him and from the way he was shivering; she could tell he had been in the cold, probably looking for her, for awhile. "I'm sorry...sorry," she kept repeating the words between scattered kisses.

Peeta pulled away from her and asked, "Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

She couldn't tell him the truth without hurting him so she told him a half truth, "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Don't ever do that to me again," his lips were pressed into her hair as he held her against his body.

"I won't," even through their thick garments she could feel his heart racing. "I won't." She placed a hard kiss against his lips.

"Come on," Peeta stood up and held his hand out to her. "Your family is worried sick about you." He knew even staying next to the fence would be pushing their luck considering the Peacekeepers were on the hunt for them.

The moment she stood up she could feel the sharp stabbing pain shooting up her leg through the heel of her foot. "Oooh," she let out a little grimace.

"What's wrong?" Peeta's arm automatically went around her waist.

"I hurt my foot on that drop." She took a few steps and said, "It's not so bad. I can make it."

"You sure?" Peeta asked with concern in his voice.

"Yeah." She really had no choice.

"Here," he reached to take her game bag off of her shoulder. "Let me carry that for you."

"It's empty," she reached behind her and began rubbing her tailbone which she was sure she'd done some damage to as well.

Peeta gave her a curious look and said, "Katniss, you've been gone all day and you've got nothing to show for it? What the hell have you been doing out there all day long?" Anger began to slowly creep back up on him.

Katniss wanted to tell him about Bonnie and Twill, but this wasn't the time or the place for it and she couldn't tell him that she had initially gone into the woods to think about whether or not she really wanted to get married. What was she going to say, 'Look Peeta, I'm going to marry you regardless, but I thought I'd try and figure out if that's what I really want for my life?' "I wanted to go to the lake. Say goodbye to it...you know...see it one last time." It was sort of the truth.

Peeta could feel his frustration with her coming back full force at her obvious lie, but he tried to push it aside. For now he was just grateful she was within his reach. "Well, we need to get home. There are Peacekeepers looking for us...wondering where we've been all day."

Katniss stopped walking and said, "Peacekeepers? What for?"

Peeta arched a brow and said, "Gee, Katniss...I wonder?" He started leading her towards home. "It's probably for the best that you didn't bring anything home with you from the woods."

Katniss' mind began to race. If Peacekeepers knew they had been gone all day long and they showed up empty handed, how would they explain their disappearance? "We should stop at some shops."

"Are you crazy? Those Peacekeepers are probably at your house by now," Peeta's voice was starting to rise.

"Yeah and how do we explain where I've been if I show up with an empty bag? You said it yourself; I've been gone all day with nothing to show for it."

"Katniss, we're going home," he insisted.

"You go home. I'm going to town." She had that tone in her voice that said, 'and nothing's going to change my mind.'

"Why do you have to be so damn stubborn all the time?" He could feel his pulse throbbing in his temples. Sometimes Katniss could really test his patience.

"Why do you have to fight with me when I'm right?" She began to slide her foot, which was aching more and more, along the pavement.

He refused to acknowledge her point about going home empty handed, but he agreed to accompany her to some shops. "We'll stop at a couple of places and then we're going home."

"I told you...you can go ahead without me. I don't need you to..." she let her sentence trail off. The fact was she did need him. More than that, she wanted him with her. She didn't want to be without him again after that scare with the fence.

"I'm going with you. The last thing we need is for the two of us to split up." Peeta noticed her dragging her foot. "How bad is it?"

"I'll be fine. Let's go pick up some bandages for mom. She's almost out." Plus Katniss thought she might need some. She wasn't sure of the extent of her injuries. All she knew was that her foot and her butt were killing her.

They stopped and picked up a few necessities for her mother, and then Katniss insisted they stop at the candy store. "We don't need candy," Peeta argued.

"We don't need it, but I want it," Katniss' voice was low and determined.

"Why?" Peeta could feel the tension building between the two of them; he just didn't know when it was going to boil over, but there was no doubt in his mind that it would.

"Why not?" She was simply looking for things to fill her game bag. An excuse for being out of her house for so long. So she purchased some peppermints and stuffed them in her bag adding to her bounty. "Just a couple more places and we can go," she said.

"We should stop by the bakery," Peeta had been thinking about it and figured he should let his family know that they were okay and on their way home since they were in town anyway.

They picked up a couple more nonessential items then made their way to his parent's shop. The sound of the bell on the front door brought his parents to the front of the store.

"Peeta," his mother greeted them both dryly. "Katniss."

"Mrs. Mellark." 'Witch,' Katniss thought to herself.

"What can I get you?"

"We'll take a loaf of herb bread, mom." Peeta took some money out of his pocket and placed it on the counter. He looked at his father and said, "How you doing, dad?"

His father's voice was full of tension. "Good, son. Yourself?"

"We're fine. Just grabbing some bread and heading home." Peeta didn't want his family to get in trouble for their disappearance that day, they shouldn't be held accountable for his and Katniss' actions. "We've had a long day. Katniss and I decided to spend the day out and about. Just wanted to get away from everything. The wedding plans can get a bit tedious at times so we thought we'd take a break from it today."

"If you didn't want to have a big wedding then you shouldn't have said yes to having it at the Capitol...though you can't really say no to the President himself." Peeta's mother stared at Katniss. "What's wrong with you girl? You keep rubbing your back." She said it like Katniss' actions were annoying her.

"Oh...uh..." Katniss dropped her hand. "Nothing. I'm just..." She had no clue how to explain herself and no desire to either.

"Katniss are you okay?" Peeta gently turned her by her shoulders.

"It's nothing, Peeta. I'm just tired from all the walking we did today."

He saw the flash of pain in her eyes. "Ah, I see." He turned to his mother. "She's fine mom. Thanks for asking." He took the bread and put it in her bag then took it from her. "Come on." He led Katniss out of his parents shop and said, "See ya."

"Your dad barely said two words. Is he all right?" She asked quietly, taking hold of Peeta's arm for support.

"Peacekeepers came to my parent's looking for us while I was there and he covered for me."

Katniss stopped walking and looked at the bakery over her shoulder. "Your dad? You mean your mother didn't turn you in?"

Peeta gave her a stern look and said, "No. She didn't see me." He wrapped his arm around her waist to help her walk and said, "We need to move a little faster. Let's go." The second they turned the corner and made it out of town he let the day's frustrations out. "Did you ever stop to think about the rest of us today, Katniss?"

Katniss wasn't in the mood for an argument, but she knew it was coming. She had known it even before she had reached the fence. She hadn't intended on fighting with him, but it happened just the same. "Look, Peeta. I already said I was sorry...multiple times and I meant it. The Peacekeepers aren't going to do anything to us. They don't have any proof of where I..."

"What about the cameras?" he interrupted her.

"Sure, they're going to punish me and then what? The Capitol is going to miss out on the wedding of the century? I don't think so," she countered.

He hated that she spoke about their upcoming marriage with such detachment. To him it didn't matter where they were holding the ceremony as long as they got married he'd be happy. He grit his teeth and pushed that topic momentarily to the side. "Regardless, you should've told me where you were going." The more they talked the angrier he got. For some reason she refused to see his point which was pretty typical of her, but today it irked the hell out of him.

"Did it ever occur to you that I wanted some time to myself?" She argued. "Maybe I didn't want to tell you where I was going?"

He stopped walking and faced her head on. "Well, too bad, Katniss. That's what married people do. They tell each other things like that. They don't just disappear without letting the other person know where they've gone. I know we're not married yet, but you better get used to doing things like that sooner rather than later."

"You expect me to give up every single right I have if we get married? I can't even..."

"If? **IF?**" Peeta could no longer keep his temper in check. "You've got some nerve, Katniss." His voice wasn't loud, but it was full of fury. "Want to know what I did today while you were out enjoying your day in the woods?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "I tried to keep your mother and sister from worrying out of their minds. I searched this entire district for you. I've been out since before Prim went to school this morning searching every place I could think of only to find no Katniss. And I thought...no, she wouldn't do this. She'd never up and leave without telling me. She knows I'd worry about her especially after the incident with Gale." Peeta glared at her. "I can't feel my damn fingers. I'm freezing my ass off. My dad had to hide me from Peacekeepers and right now they're probably waiting inside of your house..." he pointed at her. "...with your sister and your mother. Then you stand there and you..." Peeta hadn't realized how loud he had gotten. He lowered his voice down and stared in her guilt filled eyes. "I love you, Katniss. I searched this whole district for you because I love you and I don't give a damn where we get married. But when you turn around and use the word, 'if' like I'm nothing more than an afterthought..." Peeta took hold of her arms and with a tremble in his voice he said, "After everything we've been through...how dare you stand there and throw the word 'if' at me."

Katniss honestly didn't know how to respond to him. She was completely taken aback at how much his words cut through her. She tried to reassure him, but it came out sounding like a pathetic attempt to cover her ass. "That's not what I meant and you know it. Of course, we're getting married."

"Yeah, because that's what we told the country we're going to do..." Katniss would never go back on the proposal, hell she was the one that encouraged him to do it on national television. "...but what about you? Have you even decided yet, Katniss? Do you even know if that's what you want?" Peeta could see it in her eyes. Suddenly he knew why Katniss had disappeared into the woods that day. Her desperate need to get away without telling him where she was going. She was trying to figure out whether or not she wanted to marry him. The anger left his voice as quickly as it had entered. "Do you love me, Katniss?"

"Yes!" She gripped his face in her hands. "You know I do." 'Then why,' she wondered, 'are you driving him so crazy? Why are you questioning every single aspect of your relationship with him?' "Peeta, I love you. I was just a little confused...that's all."

He didn't think it was possible for her to break his heart, but in that moment, he felt like she had shattered it to pieces. He didn't know why her lack of an answer to his question about them getting married came as a surprise to him. He knew where she stood with the whole getting married thing, even though she had said on numerous occasions in front of other people she was happy to be getting married, she had yet to tell him herself. It was always for someone else's benefit. "We should go." She was having a difficult time walking and his fingers had gone almost completely numb. "I'd carry you, but I'm afraid I'd drop you."



"It's okay. I can walk," she tried to say it without cringing at the thought of putting pressure on her foot.

He bent down and said, "Hop on my back."

"What?" She just looked at him as though he were insane.

"Come on. You can wrap your legs around my waist and I can use my arms to hold you up. Hop on."

She gave it a thought and finally caved in. She wrapped her legs around his torso and her arms around his neck, keeping hold of her game bag with her fingers. His arms looped under her legs as he held her firmly in place and walked them home. Katniss' chin rested on his shoulder and her lips were pressed closed to his ear. She felt horrible for what she had put him through. When she had woken up that morning she hadn't thought about what he'd been going through while she was gone, she was only thinking of herself. "Peeta?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you where I was going. It was inconsiderate of me. I won't do it again." She knew when she said it to him, that she was speaking the truth. If he had done something like that, she'd be screaming at the top of her lungs at him.

"I don't understand why you couldn't tell me where you were going, Katniss. Why couldn't you just tell me you needed some time to yourself in the woods?"

"Because you would've insisted on coming with me, or we would've had a fight about me going all together," she confessed.

Peeta hated to admit it to himself, but she was right. "Yeah, I probably wouldn't have let you out of my sight if you told me you were going there." Still she had taken a big chance. "Thing is, Katniss...you can't do things like that anymore. Your actions don't just affect you. If those Peacekeepers were at my parent's you can bet they're at your house right now. That's not fair to the people we love."

She buried her face in his hair then whispered in his ear, "I know. I'm sorry." They were quiet as they entered Victor's Village. "You really think they're in my house?"

"Oh, I know they are," Peeta said. "So let's act like we don't have a care in the world, okay?"

"Okay." Katniss wasn't sure how she was going to accomplish that considering everything that had happened to her that day. There was one thing she could do that would help. "Peeta, you didn't answer me before. You do know I love you, right?"

"Yeah, I know that, Katniss." He leaned his lips down and kissed the arm that had been wrapped around his neck. "I love you too...even though I'm pissed as hell at you." Just as they were about to enter her house he said, "So...I can't call you sweetheart, huh?" The sound of their laughter filled the air as they entered her home.

Katniss knew what was waiting on the other side of the door for her, but Peeta's comment had taken her completely off guard, she couldn't help but to laugh at it.

"There they are now," her mother said a little too brightly. "Just in time for dinner."

Peeta slid Katniss down his body and heard her suck in a breath when his hand touched a tender spot on her back. His arms immediately

went around her waist when he noticed her wobbling. "See? I told you we were right on time." He placed a kiss against her nose. "Now you have to do whatever I say."

"Says who?" Katniss knew Peeta was playing at some sort of game and she knew she had a role to play too.

"Says me. We did have a bet my darling, Miss. Everdeen and I won." His voice was low and flirtatious.

"Then I guess I better pay up," she gave him the best lighthearted voice she could muster up.

Peeta leaned in and whispered in her ear. "I'm going to take off your snowsuit. When I pull away, giggle like I said something funny." He kissed her ear before looking into her eyes.

Katniss not only giggled, but she smacked at his shoulder and placed a hand against it as well, partly to be coy, but mostly to keep her balance.

"Katniss...Peeta, you have guests," her mother interrupted their fake foreplay. "They've been waiting here for hours."

"Mmmm..." Peeta nuzzled Katniss' neck as he took his coat off. "We have guests."

Katniss didn't have a clue as to how she was going to walk into her living room without screaming in pain, but she didn't have to worry because Peeta lifted her up around her waist and continued to nuzzle her neck. "What do you think you're doing?" She asked him.

"Collecting on my bet," He pulled away from her. "I plan on holding you for the rest of the night."

Katniss lifted her eyebrows and said, "I forget...who lost that bet?" Peeta walked her into the next room and stopped when they saw the Peacekeepers. "Oh...hello," Katniss greeted them with a smile.

"Miss. Everdeen. Mr. Mellark," the female Peacekeeper stared at them.

"Hey, how you doing?" Peeta smiled at them then turned to Prim and Haymitch who were playing a game of chess. "Hey, old man." Haymitch didn't look at him; he just lifted his chin in greeting and studied the chess board. "Hi, Prim. Kicking his butt?"

"Yup," she smiled up at Peeta.

"We have a message for you from Head Peacekeeper Thread. Mind telling us what the two of you have been up to today?" The female Peacekeeper asked Katniss and Peeta.

Peeta spun Katniss around in a half circle so he could be closer to the woman and said quietly under his breath, "I'd rather not say what we've been doing in front of her little sister." He waggled his brows at the male Peacekeeper who tried to hide his grin.

"Peeta," Katniss gave him a playful smack on the shoulder. She could feel the blood rushing into her cheeks, which she was sure, was the reaction Peeta was hoping for.

Peeta took notice of Haymitch and Prim's game and took the seat between them, placing Katniss on his lap before his hand completely gave out and he dropped her on the floor. "It's a lost cause, Haymitch. Might as well give up now."

"No, kid. I think I've got her."

Katniss looked at the board and decided to add her two cents.  
"Haymitch still has a shot."

Peeta and Prim exchanged glances before Prim announced,  
"Checkmate in three."

"Where?" Haymitch and Katniss asked at the same time.

Prim and Peeta rolled their eyes as Katniss and Haymitch stared at the board unbelievably. "Right there, old man." Peeta pointed out the pieces to Haymitch.

Haymitch lifted his gaze to Prim's and said, "Rematch."

"How many times have you lost to her?" Peeta asked.

Haymitch just glared at him. Peeta chuckled and said, "That many, huh?"

"She cheats," Katniss said under her breath to her mentor.

"I do not!" Prim said with a smile. "You're just a sore loser." She looked at her opponent and said, "Like Haymitch."

"I am not," both Haymitch and Katniss said at the same time then gave each other dirty looks.

"Ever notice that they play the exact same game every time, Prim?" Peeta leaned down as if telling her a secret. "Probably because they share the same brain."

"I always knew you were smart, Haymitch," Katniss said with a smirk.

"That's right, sweetheart. Stand up for your old mentor."

Peeta leaned down and whispered in Prim's ear and after Haymitch's first move they both laughed.

"What's so funny?" Katniss asked.

"Haymitch just moved exactly where Peeta said you would if you were playing," Prim couldn't hide her smile.

"I told you, they're just alike." Peeta said with a smile.

"We are not!" Haymitch and Katniss answered once again in unison. Both of them turned and faced the other. "Knock it off!" Their voices echoed through the living room in perfect harmony. Katniss' full of frustration. Haymitch's like he was sick of Katniss' smart ass comments.

Peeta and Prim couldn't stop laughing at the pair of them as they gave each other dirty looks. The male Peacekeeper had to lift his hand to his mouth and pretend to cough to disguise his own laughter.

Katniss accidentally bumped herself against the table and Peeta saw her wince. He ran a hand down her back in an attempt to find her sore spot. "Okay, you're nothing like Haymitch..." He rubbed his hand in a circle against her hip. "Better?" They both knew he was asking if he had found the right spot.

"No," she held her face close to his to hide the pain she knew was showing in her eyes.

He moved his hand to the middle of her back and placed a soft, lingering kiss against her cheek. "Prim's more like him than you. Better?"

She shook her head. "No."

He hated seeing her in pain. He moved his hand downward until he felt her body react and heard her little whimper. He instantly reached up and pulled her in for a kiss so he could disguise her noises as he rubbed his hand in a slow circle against her tailbone. "Better now?" He whispered against her lips.

"Yes," she leaned back in and continued kissing him. Letting him relieve some of her pain felt so damn good.

"You two might as well have a seat," Prim said to the Peacekeepers. "Once they get started, no telling when they'll stop."

Peeta heard Prim's comment and thought it would be best to get the pair out of there, so he said, "Sorry. Didn't you two say you had a message for us?"

The female, who was obviously the one in charge, asked, "What's in the bag?"

"The bag?" Katniss asked realizing that she had still been holding onto her game bag. "Oh." She dumped it out on the table and said, "See for yourself." The booty they had collected earlier came pouring out onto the table and Katniss took great pleasure in the look of disappointment that crossed the female Peacekeeper's face when Prim and Haymitch started fighting over the candy. "So what was the message you had for us?" Katniss asked innocently.

"Head Peacekeeper Thread wanted us to inform you that the fence that surrounds the woods would be kept on twenty-four hours a day from now on."

"Wasn't it always?" Katniss leaned her head against Peeta's shoulder.

"It is now," the woman said in a low, menacing voice.

"Well, I'm sure we'll all sleep easier knowing that the lapse in security has been addressed." Katniss could feel Peeta's fingers digging into her waist as a warning to her, but she couldn't help the dig against the people that had spent hours in her home waiting for her return.

"We thought you'd want to warn your cousin."

"We'll make sure we do," Peeta said as he picked up a piece of peppermint and shoved it into Katniss' mouth before she could say anything else. "Thank you for stopping by. I'm sure you're in a hurry to leave."

No sooner had the front door closed behind the Peacekeeper's backs, Katniss' whole body slumped against the table and a groan escaped from her lips.

"Is it your foot or your back?" Peeta kept rubbing at her sore spot as her mother rushed into the living room. Dinner was completely forgotten.

"What's wrong?" Prim asked in her timid little voice.

"She slipped and fell," Peeta answered quickly. He could see the looks of doubt on everyone's faces. "On the ice."

Prim and her mother began getting to work as Peeta held onto Katniss. "Haymitch, grab a clean pot and fill it with some snow, please," Evelyn gently ordered him.

"Which foot is it, Katniss?" Prim asked.

Katniss couldn't speak without moaning in pain so she just tapped at the leg. The second Prim bent down to take off her boot Katniss began to cry and Peeta lifted her face to his.



"It's okay. Shhh. I've got you." It was killing him to see her suffer so much. "They're going to make you feel better now." His thumb brushed away the tears that continued to roll down her cheeks.

"It hurts," Katniss' insides were quaking.

"I know. I know," Peeta held onto her and spoke to her mother without breaking eye contact with Katniss. "Her back got hurt too." He brushed his fingers along her tailbone. "Here."

"I'll get something for it," Evelyn spoke.

Katniss closed her eyes tightly and tried not to concentrate on how badly she was hurting. Not only physically, but emotionally as well. Everyone she loved had been hurt by her actions that day, especially Peeta. "Is your hand okay?"

"It'll be fine once it warms up," he answered. "Don't worry about me." He rested his forehead against hers. He was instantly flooded with guilt for fighting with her. "Katniss, I'm sorry," he whispered to her.

"No," she whispered back. "It was my fault. I was stupid." She lifted her fingers to his cheek and mouthed the words, "Forgive me?"

He nodded his head and mouthed back, "Will you forgive me?"

She gave him a pathetic smile through her tears and nodded back at him, mouthing, "Yes." She sucked in a choppy breath as her foot was placed in a bowl full of snow. Her mother began lowering the waistband of her pants to examine her tailbone and Katniss buried her face in Peeta's shoulder. 'All of this because you had to have some time alone. Why couldn't you have gone to your old house in the Seam, Katniss?' She thought to herself.

"Peeta?" Evelyn asked. "Are your fingers still giving you problems?"

"A little, but they're getting better now that they're warming up," he answered.

Evelyn poured some oil into the palm of his hand and said, "Rub this...gently against her tailbone and make sure to use your fingers. It should help both of you."

Peeta felt the warmth of the oil seconds after applying it to Katniss' back. He sighed into her ear as he felt the blood flowing through his digits again. "That feels much better."

After some careful examination, it was determined that Katniss had most likely gotten a hairline fracture in her foot and needed to stay off of it. "Thank God you were there to catch me," Katniss whispered to Peeta. "If you hadn't been. I probably would've smashed every bone in my body."

Peeta silently cursed himself for not doing a better job of getting her out of the tree when she jumped from it. "We should get you to bed."

Katniss accepted the sleep syrup her mother gave to her and let Peeta carry her up to her bedroom. Being in Peeta's arms as he lifted her up the stairs filled her with a familiar sense of security. She rested her head against his shoulder and allowed herself to be protected by him, even though she hated it when he constantly sheltered her, in that moment she wanted nothing more than for Peeta to take care of her. To keep her safe. To love her. She never wanted him to leave her side. She wanted to tell him that. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him and how sorry she had felt for everything she had been putting him through over the past week or so, but the words wouldn't come out. The sleep syrup was working too quickly. Katniss felt him lay her down under her covers...felt his arms slipping away from her.

"Stay with me," the words came out before she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Peeta looked down at her, his heart swelled with emotion, "Always." He climbed into bed with her and took her into his arms. He could feel the dead weight of her body from the sleep syrup against his as he pulled her closer to him. He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled her familiar fragrance. Fresh air, pine. She smelled like the woods. She smelled like Katniss. He didn't know how long he lay there breathing her in or when his tears started to fall, all he knew was that he was thankful she was back in his arms where she belonged. "Always, Katniss," he whispered hoarsely against her hair. He began to place little pecks against her head as his crying took him over. His body began to spasm as he thought, 'I thought I lost you. You were gone. What would I do without you, Katniss? I can't live...can't breathe without you.' As though his thoughts were predicting his body's actions he began sucking in jerky breaths of air. He squeezed her against him, holding her as close to him as possible. He started when he felt the tender touch of a hand on his shoulder.

"Peeta..." his soon to be mother in law said softly to him.

Peeta lifted his face and turned it towards the wall, trying to hide his emotions. He wiped his tears with the back of his hand and sniffed. After taking a few deep breaths he said, "She asked me to stay...I hope that's okay. I...uh..." He could feel the tears threatening the back of his eyes again. "I really don't want to go."

Katniss' mother walked around to the other side of the bed and sat on the edge to face Peeta and lifted his face with the tips of her fingers so he could look at her. "You don't have to leave. You never have to leave, Peeta. This is your home for as long as you want it to be."

Peeta gave her a slow nod and said, "Thank you."

Evelyn brushed the hair away from his forehead and wiped some stray tears off of his cheeks. "Do you know why I didn't want Katniss to have a serious boyfriend?" Peeta shook his head. Evelyn stared to the side and said, "Because I knew how hard it would be on her if she went through something like I did." She turned to look at Peeta. "Everyone thinks Katniss is tough as nails, but we know better, don't we?" She gave Peeta a little grin.

"She's a big softy," Peeta said with a hint of pathetic laughter in his voice.

"On the outside," Evelyn continued. "She's stone, but inside, she's fragile. And I never really worried about her having to go through what I did when I lost my husband. Katniss never wanted to marry and she never really let anyone get close enough to her...oh, there was Gale, but...even he didn't see her." Evelyn flattened out her dress against her legs. "He thought he did, but most men think that way about women. They all think they can read us like a book."

"I think you're confusing as hell," Peeta chuckled.

"You're smart that way. A lot like your father," Evelyn gave him a smile.

Peeta wondered for years, but he never dared to ask his dad. "Could I...I mean...you don't have to answer if you don't want to...but...what went on between you and my dad?"

Evelyn sighed and let out a breathy, "Oh...that was a long time ago." She sat quietly for a minute then began talking. "When I was in school my best friend was Maysilee Donner. Your father, Maysilee and I were quite the trio when we were young." This came as news to Peeta. He didn't know his dad knew Maysilee too. "Then came the reaping and Maysilee...well...we lost her in the Games that year." Evelyn's face took on a somber expression. "We both missed her very much, but

seeing your dad only reminded me of my best friend so I began avoiding him at school. Then one day a young man started talking to me...told me he was sorry about Maysilee dying. I knew him from the shop my parents owned. He used to come in there all the time. Your father noticed him spending time with me and took me aside one day...he told me he loved me and that he was afraid I was losing sight of things because of Maysilee's death." Evelyn gave Peeta a sorrowful look. "And he could've been right. I'm not sure. To be fair...before Maysilee went into the Games, I had a very big crush on your father. Then...everything changed. Life wasn't working out the way I thought it would."

"Did you ever love my dad?" Peeta asked.

"I did, but I wasn't *in* love with him," she answered.

"You fell in love with Katniss' father?" Peeta asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Yes," Evelyn said dreamily. "I'll never forget the day he took me out into the schoolyard. I showed him the oak tree Maysilee and her beau used to sit under at lunch and he showed me the mockingjays that were in the cluster of trees behind us. He sang to them and..."

"All the birds fell silent," Peeta said softly, unintentionally finishing her sentence for her.

Evelyn looked at him and said, "Yes, they did." She paused. "I knew right then and there that I wanted to spend my life with him."

"What did my dad say when you told him?"

Evelyn looked down then back up again. "Your father, whose heart I had broken, turned out to be my greatest ally. When I told my parents

that I wanted to marry Katniss' father they threatened to disown me...to lock me in the house...to have him arrested for stealing even though he hadn't done anything...you name it, they came up with it. I was certain it was over. Then one day your father showed up at my door with a bouquet of flowers, his hair all combed...dressed to the nines. It turned out my parents had arranged a date for me. We were both eighteen at the time, but I was still living under their roof and had nowhere to go. The truth was...I was scared." She let out a deep breath. "If it had been anyone else, I'm sure I would've faked an illness, but since it was your father I left with him. We didn't say a word. We just walked. I stared at the ground the entire time until your dad said to me, 'Well this is where I leave you Evelyn.' He kissed my forehead, handed me the flowers and said, 'Be happy.'" Evelyn had tears in her eyes as she told Peeta the rest of the story. "I was standing at the stairs of the Justice Building and waiting for me was Katniss' father. We went inside, got married and my parents never spoke to me again." She smiled. "And it was one of the greatest moments of my life thanks to your father."

Peeta had never been more proud of his dad. He could never imagine handing Katniss off to Gale to get married. He'd never do it. 'Then again,' Peeta thought. 'You're not your father in this scenario. Gale is.' "Did you and my dad ever talk again after that?"

"Not really. My husband spoke to him more than I did. I actually believe they became friends over the years, but I never really asked. Truthfully I didn't want to know. He had gotten married shortly after I did and his new wife didn't really seem like the type that would appreciate the two of us as friends," Evelyn gave Peeta a knowing look.

"I've met the woman. She's not that friendly."

Evelyn chuckled. "So you see, Peeta...I know what it's like to love someone the way you and Katniss love each other. What it's like to let that emotion fill your whole spirit. And I always wanted that for my girls until..."

"Till your husband died."

"Yes," Evelyn rubbed Peeta's hand. "After that I couldn't bare the thought of either one of my children suffering the way that I did. Prim...she could handle it. She's stronger inside than Katniss is when it comes to things like that. Give her a bunny or a bird and she'll melt like a piece of chocolate on a hot summer day, but when it comes to human emotions, Prim's a tough one."

"Katniss is the exact opposite," Peeta said. "That girl..." he shook his head remembering how she took Rue's death...even Thresh's death.

"If she lost you...it would destroy her and the moment I saw the way she reacted..." Evelyn lifted her fingers to her chest. "When you said you loved her during your interviews and they showed Katniss' on the screen...I just knew...I knew...my daughter was in deep trouble." Evelyn looked at Peeta. "I really didn't want her to lose you and when you both won I was so thrilled, but I will admit...the mother in me kicked in and my old fears reared their ugly head."

"And now?" Peeta asked. "Why'd you change your mind about me and Katniss?"

"Because seeing the two of you so miserable while you were apart...it reminded me of the pain I went through when my parents tried to keep me from marrying Katniss' dad and no one has the right to tell someone who they can or cannot love. So...whether you have a week or a hundred years...I will support you two and I will never stand in your way again." Evelyn stood up and placed a kiss against her

daughter's forehead then one on Peeta's. "Goodnight, Peeta. Sleep well."

Katniss was put on strict bed rest for a week. In that time Peeta stayed with her, only leaving her side when she was asleep to take care of his own personal grooming or he'd make her some cheese buns. She still hadn't come to any conclusions about the wedding and when a trunk full of wedding dresses showed up at her house with a note from Effie saying that President Snow personally approved them, Katniss stomach churned. Just as Katniss put thoughts of the dresses out of her mind, Peeta received a delivery of tuxedos refreshing her mind of its dilemma. By the second week, Katniss' mother allowed her to be taken downstairs on occasion, but for the most part she and Peeta stayed in her room working on a family book that was filled with information on medicinal herbs. Peeta sketched and Katniss printed her knowledge of each plant carefully under each of his pictures.

One morning as Katniss watched Peeta's fingers bringing the page to life, she stared at his features. His long, blond eyelashes, so curly and highlighted by the sunlight streaming through the window. His straight nose with the slightest bump. Then there were his eyes...those blue eyes that took on such a serious look when he worked on his art. Katniss knew he went to another world when he drew, a place where he could escape from reality. That look he had on his face when he sketched was so familiar to her, she had seen it before. In the arena when he took on the Careers, when he protected her from the Peacekeeper in District Eleven and when he stood up to the new Head, Thread for Gale. His rose colored cheeks and the arches of his lips. She stared at his mouth and pictured his lips moving. She could see him telling her he loved her...making a joke...telling her about the first day of school. She remembered that day like it was yesterday. The teacher asked who knew the Valley Song and Katniss had raised her hand. She remembered singing the song, but the thing that really



stuck out in her memory was when she was done singing and the little boy that was staring at her from across the room. Two things stuck out in her mind about that moment, he looked like he had splashed toothpaste on his shirt and he had the bluest eyes she had ever seen in her whole, entire life and over the course of five years Katniss had seen a lot of eyes. The force of it hit Katniss like a punch to the gut. She wanted to marry Peeta Mellark.

Peeta's eyes flashed to hers, but they were no longer fixed and concentrated on his work, they were now playful and full of love. "This is nice. It's almost like we're...normal," he said the last word as if it weren't allowed.

Katniss smiled at him and said, "I like normal." A plan was forming in her head, but she'd need some help. She was hoping she could get her mother and Prim in on it. 'Yes, Prim,' she thought to herself. 'Would be a crucial part to it.'

Each afternoon Peeta would take her downstairs for a change of scenery. Katniss mind kept floating back to her encounter with Bonnie and Twill, she wanted so badly to tell Peeta about it, but it wasn't safe to do so in her own house. She'd have to wait until they went to his place, but her mother wouldn't allow her to leave yet so Katniss decided to turn on the television set and watch for signs of District Thirteen. To see if Bonnie and Twill were right about the footage. The first time she asked Peeta for the remote he asked her why she wanted to watch television. "I just want to see what's on," she lied through her teeth.

He knew her too well. Peeta placed a soft kiss against her lips and handed her the remote then whispered into her mouth, "Liar." He knew something was up. Katniss hated watching TV. They all did.

Each day Peeta would bake for her, cheese buns, Katniss favorite thing to eat. While he was at home baking, she was secretly making plans with her mother and Prim. Their voices never rose above a whisper. Then one day, Katniss mother deemed her foot healed, but Katniss asked her mom to keep it to herself for a couple more days. She still needed time. Their plans hadn't been set yet. Her mom did allow her to go to Peeta's for a visit though.

Peeta carried her through his front door. "Spring is almost here," he said as he set her down on his sofa.

"Yes, now sit down. I've got a ton of stuff to tell you." Katniss had been waiting weeks to inform him about her trip to the woods.

Peeta said, "I've got news for you too." He jumped right in and told her. "Effie's smuggled some medications into the other districts. They're trying to figure out a way to get some here, but all of our stuff is being gone over with a fine tooth comb so..." he shrugged. "We're out of luck for now."

"Wait till I tell you my news." Katniss grinned at him and told him about her meeting with Bonnie and Twill.

"District Thirteen?" Peeta sat back and stared straight ahead. He wondered if it could be true. Haymitch had never said anything about it though. "Do you think it's possible?"

"I think they're insane, but...who knows." Katniss shrugged. "I never thought I'd be the face of the nation either yet I saw my face on the posters those people were waving."

"And it's over? The uprising?" Peeta sounded dejected. "Effie didn't mention that."

"Maybe she doesn't know," Katniss ran her hand over his shoulder.  
"How would they have gotten word out to her?"

"I guess." Peeta sat quietly for a second then said, "I knew there was a reason you wanted to watch television. You hate watching television."

"Speaking of..." Katniss reached her fingers out and waggled them.  
"Hand me that remote. I want to see what's on."

Peeta pressed the button and they both sat there staring at the screen looking for any signs of District Thirteen. They had seen one story, an old one of District Thirteen and sure enough the image of the mockingjay's wing was right where Bonnie and Twill had said it would be, but Katniss told Peeta, "That doesn't prove a thing. For all we know, they could've seen that story. It's been repeated at least a hundred times over the past week alone and it's decades old."

Two days later Peeta woke up next to a grinning Katniss. "Well good morning. You look happy."

"I am," she smiled. "Very happy."

"And what brought this on?" He trailed his finger down her nose and placed a kiss against it.

'This is the day,' she thought. "You."

"Me?" He said with arched brows. "What did I do?"

"You fell in love with me." Katniss rested her head against his chest and said, "Know what I decided this morning?"

"What?" he asked.

"I decided that I was going to spend this day doing nothing but loving you...letting you love me." She raised her face to his and said, "What do you think?"

Peeta had no clue what had come over her, but he liked it. "I think I'm loving this sudden change in you."

"Good," she smiled. "I don't suppose you'd be in the mood to make us some breakfast?"

"I'd love to. Why don't I go home and I can..."

"No!" Katniss placed her hand against his chest. She couldn't allow him to leave her house. "You need to stay with me today. Mom had to go somewhere with Prim, so it's just you and me."

"Oh...okay." Peeta smiled down at her and said; "In that case..." he gave his eyebrows a few wags.

"Maybe later." She teased him. "Right now, I'm starving."

He carried her downstairs, even though she could now walk, though he didn't know that, and made her a breakfast fit for a queen. Katniss ate it slowly, chewing every bite about a million times. Her eyes continuously flashed to the clock behind Peeta's head. When it was late morning she asked him to run a bath for her and insisted that he sit in the bathroom with her. He could keep his back turned while she bathed, but the truth was, she didn't want him sneaking off to his house while she was in the tub. Afterwards he helped her dry her hair and get dressed. While he took a shower Katniss stuffed some last minute things into the suitcase she had under her bed and willed the day to hurry on. Lunch came and went. Peeta suggested they watch some television, but Katniss didn't want any thoughts of the rebellion to enter her mind, so she asked Peeta to sketch some plants in her

family book instead. When her mother and Prim finally came back home she almost let out a huge sigh. Instead she said, "Nice to see you two. Did you take care of everything?"

Prim gave her a smile and said, "Yup."

Evelyn put a bag down in the kitchen and said to Prim, "Why don't we take the rest of this upstairs?"

Prim smiled and said, "Okay, mom."

Katniss tilted her head to the side and thought, 'Holy cow...I can't believe I'm doing this.' She watched as her mother and sister disappeared to their rooms. Katniss rested her palms back against the sofa and watched as Peeta set down the family book on the table in front of them. "Peeta?" He turned to her. This was it. The moment she had been avoiding her entire life.

"Yes, Katniss?" God how she loved his voice...the way he said her name. He didn't need to call her by any pet names like sweetheart...Katniss was more than enough.

She held his hands in hers and looked him in deeply in the eyes. Katniss hadn't expected this in her life. She had fought against it until she met Peeta, but the moment she let him into her world it had spiraled out of control. Allowing herself to feel vulnerable...letting herself love someone was something she swore she'd never do, yet here she was. Letting love control her life and more than happy to do so. She had planned to tell Peeta how much she loved him, how he had changed her whole life...how much he had changed her. She wanted to let him know that he meant the world to her, but she was never any good with words. That was his domain. Though she searched her heart for the right thing to say she couldn't seem to voice a thing. Her lips moved but no sound came out. "Marry me?"

Peeta had been waiting for her to reach the same point in their relationship as him for quite some time. He knew she loved him, he didn't doubt that, but he wondered at times if she could ever get past her own insecurities. He searched her eyes looking for the truth after she asked him to marry her and found what he had been looking for since he was five years old. Katniss Everdeen wanted him to be just as much a part of her life as he wanted her to be a part of his. "About time you asked," he timidly smiled at her.

"Is that a yes?" God she hoped it was a yes because she didn't think she could go through this again.

"That's a hell yes," he leaned in to kiss her.

Their lips pressed softly against each others then their arms wrapped around the other's body in a tight embrace.

"I love you, Peeta," she whispered in his ear.

"I love you too," he whispered back.

Katniss could feel her heart racing in anticipation. Now it was time for her plan to really take off. She pressed her palm against the sofa for leverage to stand and said, "Wait until you see what..." the television turned on. She had accidentally pressed the button on the remote control.

"I'm standing live on the outskirts of District Thirteen where the mines have just been determined to be too toxic to approach. Officials were optimistic in their hopes that the hazardous gases would be safe after all of these years of dormancy due to the shortage of graphite in District Three, however, the study that was just released only hours ago, has proven that District Thirteen is still a dangerous wasteland and should be avoided at all cost." The reporter, who was covered in a

protective suit, appeared to be standing in front of the ruins of the Justice Building in Thirteen as the television footage came to a close, but right before the screen went to another story on the shortage of graphite in Three, Katniss and Peeta saw the flash of the mockingjay's wing in the upper right-hand corner of the television screen. It was obviously the same footage used in the news story from decades before. Their eyes met, questioning what they had just seen, all thoughts of a marriage and a proposal had momentarily left their minds.

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 13, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Twelve: Expect the Unexpected**

**Dear Readers, you might notice two different CF:R entitled stories on my page. Please note one of them is followed up with the word OUTTAKES. These are rated M stories that go hand in**

hand with this series, but cannot be published with this story due to their adult content. Please do not read it if you are under 18 and if you are a firm believer that K/P never get...physical. Also I realized that my tumblr addy never showed up so here it is: [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com/](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com/) On that page you will find what I am up to as well as stories I have written, some music to go with it and photos too. You might even get to see what the elusive Jamie Sommers looks like. Thank you to all of you who read and review. I appreciate it. Thank you to my betas who work so so sooo hard for me and get nothing but an inbox full of my nutty emails and some early drafts of my stories. S and A thank you will never be enough. Now...let us move onto...

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Prim found Madge sitting in the lunchroom all by herself. She couldn't help but feel bad for the mayor's daughter, who looked all alone in a room full of people. "Hi, Madge." Prim took a seat across from her.

"Hey, Prim. What are you doing here? Don't you have class?" They were in different grades which meant they had different lunch periods.

"Yeah, but I skipped it. I wanted to talk to you." Prim looked around and figured the noisy lunchroom was as good a place as any. No one bothered with she or Madge lately. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor...well...the favor is actually for Katniss and Peeta." Prim knew if Madge couldn't help then Katniss' entire idea would be out the window.

"What do they need?" Madge asked.

Prim moved closer to her and said, "They need your help and Katniss isn't sure if you can do it since your dad works for the Capitol and all."



Madge looked around and said, "Maybe this isn't the best place to talk. Why don't we take a walk?"

Prim and Madge headed down the empty corridors of the school and found a deserted corner where Prim told Madge exactly what was needed of her. Madge had been nervous at first and asked Prim if she could think about it, but before she walked away she said, "I'll do it tonight."

"Are you sure?" Prim asked with a look of surprise on her face. She hadn't expected Madge to agree so quickly, but Katniss was Madge's only friend so she could understand why she had said yes.

When Prim left school that afternoon she felt like she was walking on air. She didn't dare say anything to Katniss until Madge told her for certain whether or not she could do what was being asked of her. Fortunately for Prim, she didn't have to wait too long. The next day at school Madge saw her across the hall and gave her a smile and a little nod. Prim felt like her heart was going to explode with excitement.

After school, Prim and her mother went to town to pick up a few things, but really to talk to Peeta's dad. Prim's job was to distract Peeta's mother. The woman, or the witch as Katniss liked to call her, hated it when kids put their fingerprints on the glass display cases. Prim's plan was to stand in front of the cases with her fingers almost touching them...staring at the different items they had on display as if trying to decide on what to get. Now that they were rich, the woman knew better than to try and kick Prim out of the store, but she'd watch Prim like a hawk making sure her precious glass wasn't smudged.

"Hmmm..." Prim was staring at the pretty cookies with daisies on them while her mother walked around to the backdoor of the bakery to sneak in a conversation with Peeta's father. "I'm not sure what to get."

She held her fingers about an inch away from the glass and noticed Peeta's mother glaring at her. "Does the icing have a flavor?"

"It tastes like icing," the witch snapped. 'Boy, if Peeta didn't look like his dad I'd swear he was adopted,' Prim thought.

"Oooh, these look good. What are they called?"

"Cheese buns." Prim tried not to grin when Peeta's mother answered. She knew exactly what they were. Peeta made them every day for Katniss only his looked much better than these did. In fact most of the things Peeta baked looked better than the things in the bakery display cases.

Prim hemmed and hawed for several more minutes until the bell on the front door rang and her mother walked in. "Oh, there you are Primrose. I've been looking for you. Did you pick something out?"

"Not yet." Prim noticed the evil look Peeta's mother gave her own and she didn't like it one bit. She leaned both of her hands on the glass case making sure to leave two really hefty marks and said, "I think I'm going to pass today. Thanks anyway." As she walked out she thought to herself, 'I don't know how Katniss kept from punching that woman in the nose.'

It took Prim and her mother almost a week to get everything set up, but they had it all ready to go by late Sunday afternoon just as Katniss asked. There was one thing Prim wanted to do that Katniss hadn't asked for and her mother wasn't sure if it was such a good idea, but Prim had insisted. They stopped at the Hawthorne household and found Gale sitting in the living room playing with his brothers and sister. When they entered, Prim asked Gale to step outside with her while Evelyn went inside and visited with the rest of the family.

"How ya doing, Prim? I haven't seen you for awhile?" Gale asked.

"And whose fault is that, Gale Hawthorne?" Prim scolded him.

Shame crossed Gale's face as he answered, "Sorry, I haven't been around much lately. I've been working a lot so..."

"Don't make up excuses. You have Sundays off so there's no reason why you can't stop by our house every now and then. I know Katniss would love to see you. She tells me Peeta's been speaking to you more than she has." Prim turned on him. "Now how do you think that makes her feel? Her best friend not speaking to her and talking to her fiancé instead?"

"Look, Prim. It's not that I don't want to talk to your sister...it's just that...well..." Gale tripped over his words.

Prim crossed her arms and tapped her foot against the ground. "I don't have all day to wait for you to create some sort of excuse so I'm just going to come right out and ask you. Are you still in love with my sister, because if you are, you're just going to have to get over it? She's getting married to Peeta."

Gale's eyebrows shot up at Prim's directness. "I know that."

"Then? Are you or aren't you?"

"It's complicated, Prim," Gale gave her the typical adult, I'm-avoiding-your-question answer.

"No, it's not. You're either going to get over it and move on with your life or you're going to sit and dwell on it. I've always thought you were a smart person, Gale and smart people don't waste time on lost

causes." Prim hated saying what she was about to say, but Gale needed to hear it. "My sister is a lost cause."

"I know that." Gale looked off into the distance. "Trust me...I've seen firsthand how much those two love each other."

Prim felt really bad for Gale. He looked so heartbroken. 'Maybe,' she thought to herself. 'Her mom was right after all.' "Gale, Katniss needs you. I hope you know that. She misses having you around."

"Yeah...I miss her too," Gale admitted.

"Then maybe you could try and accept her and Peeta." Prim put her hand on Gale's arm. "He's a really good guy."

"I know that too." Of course, he knew that. Peeta had stood up for Gale against the new Head. "It's weird...lately I can't seem to face her. Peeta keeps telling me the same thing whenever he sees me. Telling me that Katniss really needs my friendship." Gale turned to Prim. "Can you believe that? He's telling me...practically begging me to spend time with her again. I'd never do that if she were mine, but not him..."

"He puts her feelings first, Gale. When she's hurting he wants to make her feel better and right now she's missing you so..." Prim shrugged. "...he's trying to fix it...to take care of her."

"He's a better man than me." Gale let out a sigh and said, "I'll stop by later on tonight."

Prim gave him a soft smile and said, "Tonight's not good. Katniss can't have visitors right now. She's on bed rest. She's not feeling well and my mom is probably going to give her some sleep syrup to help her get through the night." Prim was lying through her teeth, but her mother was right. Telling Gale about Katniss' plan wasn't the right

move. "Next week would be good though. Come by then. I'm sure she'll love it."

Gale nodded at her and said, "Tell her I said feel better soon, okay?"

"I will." Prim waited outside for her mother and told her what she talked to Gale about. Her mother agreed that not bringing Gale in on the newest information at hand was the wisest move.

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They stared at the television screen and back at each other, both of them wanted to voice their questions. What was in District Thirteen, because Katniss and Peeta knew now, for a fact, that the reporter that had just done her so called live report sure as heck wasn't there.

Peeta placed his hand on her leg and whispered to her, "You don't think there's actually something..."

Katniss whispered back, "I think we should talk to Haymitch."

"Katniss?" Prim's head popped around the wall at the top of the stairs. "I heard the television. Is everything...okay? Can we come down now?"

Peeta looked up at Prim wondering why she would ask for permission to come downstairs in her own house.

Katniss had almost forgotten what was waiting at Peeta's house for them. "Oh...oh...um...yeah, Prim. You and mom can come down now. Everything's great." Katniss stood up and shut the television off.

Peeta gave Katniss a strange look saying, "Should you be standing on your bad foot?"

"It's fine," Katniss held her hand out to him. "Mom told me I could walk on it two days ago."

"She what?" Peeta glared at her. "You've been able to walk this whole time and I've been carrying you around?" He wasn't sure if he should be angry or laugh at her deception. "You're a sneaky little thing aren't you?" He chose the latter. Peeta noticed the suitcase Katniss' mom had in her hand and said, "What's going on? You going somewhere?"

"Come on," Katniss took his hand. "Let's go." Her foot still ached a little, but it wasn't so bad that she couldn't make her way to Peeta's house. "I'm going somewhere. I need to get out of this house for awhile and I've decided to stay with you."

"Um...okay." He was more than happy to have her company, but he had a sneaky suspicion there was something more to this. The grins plastered on Prim, Katniss and their mother's faces as they walked towards his house were more than enough to have Peeta leaning down and asking Katniss, "Do you want to tell me what's happening here?"

"You'll see." She thought she'd be nervous. She wasn't. She was sure she'd be chewing on her bottom lip or her palms would be sweating profusely, but none of those things were happening. Instead she felt like she did when she was hunting game. Her pulse was racing, her heart was quickening and her breathing was deep and even. All of her senses were on alert. She had her eyes set on her target and he was walking alongside of her.

Prim opened Peeta's door, which he was surprised to see, was unlocked, but Katniss held him back, not allowing him to go in until her

mother had entered after Prim. "Katniss?" Peeta squinted his eyes at her. There were several people standing around his kitchen table. Haymitch, his father, Katniss' mother, Prim, but the two shockers were Madge and Mayor Undersee. "What is this?"

Katniss closed Peeta's door and said, "You didn't actually think I'd get married at the Capitol did you?"

Peeta's voice rose about an octave when he turned to her and asked, "You mean...here? Now?"

"Unless you've changed your mind in the past...twelve years," Katniss lifted the corner of her mouth in a slight grin.

Peeta's eyes burned through hers. His pulse began to race. Katniss wanted to marry him right then and there. "No...I mean...yes...I mean...no...no." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "No," he rested his forehead against hers and said, "I haven't changed my mind in the past twelve years."

"Good." Katniss could feel his hand shaking in hers. She never imagined she'd be the calm one on their wedding day. Then again she never really imagined having a wedding day. "Let's get married."

He was trying his best to keep his nerves in check, but Peeta could swear his knees were about to start knocking together. "Okay. Let's get married." He glanced at the eager and smiling faces around the room. This in no way looked like a gathering for any wedding he'd ever been to. His father was still wearing a flour covered apron, half of Haymitch's shirt was sticking out of his pants. The mayor and Madge were dressed fairly casual, but it was a weekend and even mayors got days off. The only two people that looked somewhat the part were Prim and her mom both of whom were wearing dresses, but even they looked like they had spent the day running errands or doing chores.

Their hair was falling out of their braids and their shoes were dusty from the dirt roads they must've traveled on. Then there was his bride...Katniss. Dark pants, white shirt, loose vest hanging over it and a braid going down the side of her head. All she needed was her bow and arrows and she'd look like she was headed off to the woods. To Peeta she was perfect.

"Congratulations to you both," Mayor Undersee's voice was hushed as he motioned them to come towards him. "I wish we had more time for this, but under the circumstances..." Peeta noticed some paperwork on his kitchen table. "Madge and I only have a few minutes, so I'll have to ask that you read these quickly." he picked up a page and handed it to Katniss then handed a different page to Peeta.

Katniss scanned the document the mayor handed her. It was pretty basic stuff saying once signed Peeta was the person that all of her worldly goods went to in case of her death. 'Of course, the government would make mention of death in the very first line of a marriage document,' Katniss thought to herself as she rolled her eyes. Once she signed the paper, Peeta would own half her properties and she his, he would have the right to make medical decisions on her part...essentially, Peeta would take over the role that her mother had held onto her entire life. "Okay," Katniss gave a little shrug of her shoulder. To her this was no big deal. It was what marriage was all about. "This is fine. Do I sign it?"

"What's it say?" Peeta asked. Katniss seemed pretty agreeable so to him after reading her piece of paper so he knew it had to be different than the one he had.

"Pretty much that we're getting married." Katniss turned to the mayor and said, "So...do I sign now or what?"



"One minute," the mayor said to her. "Peeta, are you through with that?"

"Yeah," Peeta held the document out to Katniss. "Do you want to read this?"

"What's it say?" It would be a lot quicker if he just explained it to her.

"That you're changing your name from Everdeen to Mellark." Peeta stared at her as he spoke, waiting to see her reaction.

For some reason she had never given a name change much thought. She was fine with getting married, happy about it even, but Everdeen had been her name her entire life. It was her father's name and now she was expected to give that up. She zipped her eyes towards the mayor and back to Peeta. She was tempted to ask if she could keep the name Everdeen, but before she could open her mouth Peeta had read her mind.

"You don't have to take my name if you don't want to, Katniss," Peeta said it as though he were fine with it, but in his heart he hoped and prayed that she would take the only thing he could offer her on their wedding day. His last name. "You can keep the name Everdeen."

The heartache that flashed across Peeta's face brought Katniss back to her senses. 'Part of getting married is becoming Mr. and Mrs. Mellark,' she told herself. "No, it's okay," Katniss looked at the mayor and gave him a few seconds before asking, "So...do we sign now?" She was feeling a bit eager now that she had read over the papers.

"There's one more document, but this one is for your parents. They must each read this and sign it before we can move forward." The mayor informed them.

Peeta looked over his shoulder at his dad and made motion with his eyes to read the page. Katniss' mother joined him and they looked over the paper together.

"Got a pen?" Peeta's father asked.

"Yes. Yes, right here," Mayor Undersee handed him one from his shirt pocket. "If you'll sign right by this X and initial right here and here..." he pointed to the bottom of the page and said, "then date it here." He looked at Katniss' mother and said, "You too Mrs. Everdeen."

Peeta's father glanced at Katniss' mother and said quietly, "When I thought about us signing a marriage license, I never thought it'd be so our kids could get married." She gave him a warm smile and a pat on the hand.

Once those papers were signed the mayor turned to Katniss and Peeta and said, "We're on a bit of a time crunch here so I'll have to keep it brief." He paused and asked, "Peeta, do you take Katniss to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Peeta had been waiting his whole life to answer this question. "I do," he blew out a breath on a smile that lit up the entire room.

"Katniss..." The mayor began. "Do you..."

"I do," she interrupted him.

The mayor was taken aback for a second. "I...I haven't asked the question yet."

"I know the question and my answer is I do. Let's move on with it," Katniss hadn't meant to sound so pushy. She just wanted to hear the

words, 'I now pronounce you husband and wife,' get to the whole, 'kiss the bride,' part.

"Let the mayor ask you, Katniss," Peeta gave her a grin, thinking to himself, 'She's so impatient.'

"Fine." Katniss turned to the mayor and said, "Ask."

"Katniss," The mayor waited for a second then said, "Do you take Peeta to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Katniss looked at Peeta, arched her brow and said, "I still do."

"You sure about this, kid?" Haymitch asked from a few feet away. "You can still back out. You haven't signed those papers yet." His cocky grin was plastered across his face. Katniss wanted to smack it off of him.

"Good. Good," the mayor ignored Haymitch's smart aleck comment. He seemed to be in a rush. "There won't be any exchanging of rings, for obvious reasons...so all I need now are your signatures." Katniss and Peeta signed the papers, dated them where they were supposed to, placed their initials where they were told and had their parents sign as their witnesses then the mayor placed some stamps on them. Mayor Undersee handed Peeta the papers and said, "Normally we keep duplicates of these at the Justice Building, however..." he flustered a bit. "...considering the circumstances, I think we'll just give the originals to you. Please put them somewhere...safe." He looked around and said, "That about sums it up. Ready Madge?" The entire ritual had taken less than ten minutes.

Katniss and Peeta exchanged curious expressions. They had signed some papers, said the words, "I do," but that was about it.

"Mr. Mayor?" Peeta said in a somewhat shy voice. "Are we...married?"

"Oh. Oh." The mayor shook his head out as if he had suddenly found his brain. "Yes. Congratulations. Now we must go. Come, Madge."

Madge had a look of shock on her face and shrugged at Katniss and Peeta. "Sorry, I've got to go. Um...Prim?"

"Okay," Prim ran to Katniss and gave her a quick hug then gave one to her new brother in law. "I'm really happy for you two. We've got to leave. Sorry. Madge was supposed to be coming over to pick up a school book she forgot and her dad didn't want her walking around by herself with all the trouble in...you know." Prim gave them a wink then rushed to the door. "It was the only way we could think of getting them over here." Prim turned to Madge and said, "Come on. I hid it under my bed. I'll get it for you."

Katniss and Peeta simply stood next to his kitchen table holding hands and staring at the remainder of their houseguests.

"Guess I better go too," Peeta's dad said. "Told your mother I had an order for a wedding cake and I was coming to ask you to do it. Of course, the cake will be cancelled..." he gave his son a grin.

"Welcome to the family, Katniss." He placed a hand on his new daughter in law's shoulder. "Peeta," he nodded at his son.

"Congratulations."

"I'll walk you out," Evelyn said. "I'd rather Prim not be alone at the house." She gave Katniss and Peeta a quick hug and kiss.

"Congratulations. I left your bag by the stairs, Katniss."

"Thanks, mom." Katniss stood there feeling like a two minute hurricane just blew through her life and left her completely disoriented.

"Oh, Peeta," his dad turned to him and said, "I left a loaf of bread by the fireplace for you." With that both of their parents were gone.

"Well...guess I'm leaving the way I came in." Haymitch walked to a window at the back of their house. "Didn't really think it would be wise to be seen with the mayor." He paused before stepping out of the abode and said, "Congratulations, sweetheart...boy. I'm sure Effie would've loved to be here for this." And then he was gone.

Everything had happened so quickly neither one of them was sure it was real.

Peeta looked over the papers and said, "What...what the hell just happened here?" His hands were trembling.

This wasn't at all what Katniss had planned. She had been to weddings before. Not a lot of them, but she knew what they entailed. Yes they had to sign some documents to make everything legal and get assigned a house, but there were always some words of...of... "Are we even married?" She snatched the papers out of Peeta's hands and began looking at them.

"It says we are," he looked over her shoulder at them. "Right there," he pointed at the mayor's signature and the stamp he placed next to their names. "We're married." Peeta ran his hand through his hair thinking, 'I married Katniss. Holy cow. Katniss married me. ME!'

Katniss had no clue why she was so angry, but she was. She smacked the pages into the palm of Peeta's hand and began to rant. "This isn't what I thought it was going to be. I thought we'd get to say some...some...vows or something. Not just sign a bunch of crap and... He didn't even tell you to kiss your damn bride!"

Peeta thought about how jumpy the mayor had looked and said, "Katniss, I think he just wanted to get out of here. I'm surprised he agreed to do it in the first place. Can you imagine what would happen to him if the Capitol found out about this?"

"But Peeta..." She couldn't give one rat's ass about Mayor Undersee at that point in time. As far as she was concerned, he had just ruined their wedding day. "That was a load of bull. Ten minutes ago we were just Katniss and Peeta and now we're Mr. and Mrs. Mellark because we signed a piece of paper?"

"What are you getting mad at me for?" Peeta had no clue why she was directing her rage at him. "I wasn't the one that planned an impromptu wedding."

"Oh, so you're blaming this on me?" Katniss turned on him. "Great! That's just great," she pulled out a chair and plopped down in it. "We've been married all of two minutes and we're already fighting."

"I'm not fighting. You are." Peeta put the papers down on the table and knelt in front of her. The last thing he wanted was for Katniss to regret her decision to marry him and he had to admit, the mayor didn't exactly perform a very romantic service. It was more like a business transaction. "Truth is...these papers only made it legal. As far as I'm concerned, we haven't had our ceremony yet." He glanced at the unlit fireplace and the loaf of bread his father left sitting next to it.

"You mean the toasting?" Katniss asked. Even that had been ruined. "No one's going to be here for it."

"Good," Peeta held his hand in hers. "Then we can say everything we want to say to each other without worrying about who's going to hear it." His eyes encouraged her to join him in anticipation.

Katniss was pissed off. Seriously angry, but not with Peeta. She felt his hand as it trailed down her braid. 'Are you going to take this out on Peeta?' She asked herself. "Okay. Let's do our toasting."

Peeta lifted her chin with his finger and said, "Try that with a smile."

"You're pushing your luck," she scowled at him.

His laugh echoed through the room. "Funny how I've come to love that scowl almost as much as your smile." This, of course, brought a grin to Katniss' face. "Come on. If we're going to do this. Let's do it right." Peeta held his hand out to her.

Katniss threaded her fingers through his and was suddenly flushed with nerves. She stared straight into Peeta's eyes and timidly asked, "What do we do first?"

"Normally, people are assigned a house and they enter it together as a married couple, but since we already have a house..."

"We have two," Katniss corrected him.

"Did you want to live here or at your place?" He was sure she'd want to live at his house since there was no one listening to their every word, but there was no guarantee that would last forever.

"I like it here." Katniss answered She wasn't even thinking about the Capitol's surveillance. "It's homey." The image of Peeta with a dishtowel slung over his shoulder and taking out a cake from the oven entered her mind.

"Okay." Peeta stood up and said, "Why don't I get everything set for the toasting and then we can get started?"

Katniss nodded at him, thinking, 'This is the strangest wedding in the history of District Twelve. In the history of Panem.'

"Sorry, I can't give you a wedding ring, but that's only temporary," Peeta called to her from the living room where he pulled out some matches, set them by the fireplace and added some kindling to the already waiting log. "Once we do this for the Capitol audience. We can get some rings."

Katniss wasn't really paying attention to anything he was saying. She just kept staring at the pieces of paper on the kitchen table that stated that they were now husband and wife. It wasn't until she heard him say the word, "ring" for the second time that she remembered something. "Oh," she got up, began searching through her suitcase until she found what she was looking for and put it in her pocket. She had wanted to give him something during the wedding ceremony, but the mayor skipped over the ring portion of it. 'Maybe she could give it to him during the toasting,' she thought.

"You okay?" Peeta was walking over to her.

"Yeah," she nodded. "I'm fine." She was petrified. Ten minutes ago she was as calm as could be and now she was a complete wreck.

"I'm glad one of us is, because I'm a mess." Peeta let out an uneasy laugh and ran his hand through his hair. "My insides are shaking like a leaf."

Katniss hugged him and finally confessed. "Me too...I mean..." she pulled away from him saying, "I'm nervous. Don't know why...I mean...we're already married."

"Not yet," Peeta's expression was full of love. "But we will be." They opened the front door and went outside. "Ready?" Peeta asked her.



Katniss nodded her head. "Yeah." Once she stepped through the doorway with him it would mark the beginning of their life as husband and wife in their "new" home. "On three?" For some reason she needed to find the courage she had in the arena when she was willing to lay down her life for Peeta and eat the nightlock.

Peeta couldn't have thought of a better way to start their life together. "On three," he agreed.

"One." He trailed his hand down her braid.

"Two." She placed her hand against his heart.

"Three." They stepped over the threshold of their home as husband and wife.

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Prim's conversation had been nagging at Gale the entire night. 'A twelve, or is she thirteen now,' Gale thought to himself. 'A young girl pretty much put you in your place.' He had told himself that he had accepted Katniss and Peeta's upcoming marriage. Whenever Peeta walked his mother home, he'd literally wait just past Gale's house until he saw him coming home from the mines to try and talk to him about Catnip. Telling Gale how much she missed him and he really needed to try and find a way to make their friendship work. Gale had told Peeta on more than one occasion that he no longer harbored any ill feelings towards them or their upcoming wedding, but somewhere deep inside he knew that was a lie. It still hurt. The worst part was Peeta. Gale had tried to hate the guy, he really did. Tried to find as many faults as he could, but it was hard to do considering Peeta's only fault was that Katniss fell in love with him. Gale couldn't even hold the

fact that Peeta loved Katniss against him. Who wouldn't love her? She was amazing. His mother had told him that time heals all wounds, proof positive were the scars on his back, but these wounds that Katniss had caused Gale, he feared...would never go away. Gale had to admit thinking about Katniss and Peeta was getting easier. He no longer wanted to beat Peeta into a pulp and truth be told, he really did want Katniss to be happy.

He walked home from the mines that night hating his job, the work the Capitol forced upon almost everyone in his district. Hated the feeling of being trapped in a cage. He used to be able to find a form of freedom on Sundays when he went into the woods, now the Capitol had taken that from him too. Gale walked into his house and was greeted by his brothers and sister. His mother had left a dinner plate sitting atop of their old coal stove in the hopes that it would keep his food warm, but they barely had enough coal to cook their food, let alone keep it warm for Gale's consumption, so he washed the daily grime from his skin with the icy water he poured into the sink and sat down with his family in front of the television.

"Any clue why we're required to watch TV tonight?" Gale asked his mother.

"I think it has something to do with Katniss and Peeta's wedding. Those Capitol folks were taking all sorts of pictures of the two of them." Hazelle answered. "Haymitch wasn't too pleased about them waking him up so early. Then again, anything before three in the afternoon is early to that man."

Gale arched a brow towards his mother and said, "They didn't leave for the Capitol already did they? I mean...the wedding is a few weeks away yet."

"No, they're still here." Hazelle sat back in her chair and set down her sewing bag.

"It's starting," Posy called out from her spot on the floor. "I bet Katniss looks really pretty in her wedding dress."

Gale watched the television screen and saw the host that Peeta had almost been condemned to sit alongside of. "Ladies and Gentlemen," Caesar Flickerman was standing in the center of the familiar stage. "Thank you for joining us tonight." The crowd let out a round of applause. His face held a serious expression when he said, "Tonight we have come to a critical..." Caesar shook his head and corrected himself. "No. Crucial point in the wedding of the star-crossed lovers."

The fork Gale had been lifting to his mouth froze. Surely this couldn't be about some wedding photos. Caesar Flickerman looked like Katniss and Peeta had called off their wedding.

Caesar's face instantly changed to one of sheer happiness as he flashed his pearly whites and said, "It's time to pick out what Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark will be wearing to their wedding!"

"Are you kidding me?" Gale let the fork drop against his plate. "Geez." He let out a breath and thought, 'These Capitol people are freaking insane.' Cinna and Portia were introduced to the stage and the Capitol audience went wild with delight. "I bet those two love all of the attention they're getting from this," Gale said to his mother.

"Oh, they seemed like nice folks to me," she played her son's comments off.

"Yeah...I'm sure they're sweet as pie." Gale watched as Caesar spoke to Cinna and Portia about the designs for the wedding and how

excited both Katniss and Peeta were when they tried on their wedding attire for the cameras.

"Now, tell me," Caesar leaned in towards Cinna. "Does Katniss have a favorite dress?"

Cinna crossed his legs and said, "I wouldn't dream of swaying the Capitol audience towards her favorite."

"Oh, you're no fun," Caesar made a playful gesture with his hand. "What about Peeta, Portia? Which does he prefer?"

"You know Peeta...he never has a bad word to say about anything," Portia fluttered her ridiculously long eyelashes.

Caesar faced the camera and said, "Well, how about you? Do you have a favorite? Let's take a look at Katniss and Peeta in all their wedding glory!" Caesar made a sweeping gesture to the large screen in the center of the stage.

Gale's television screen was instantly filled with images of Peeta wearing different tuxedos. They were all alike as far as Gale was concerned until he saw the last one. Even Gale had to admit it was something special. The material was so black it looked like it had hints of blue in it. Even the shirt was black, which Gale had thought was strange for a wedding, but the accents that Portia had added to it...the details, were perfect for it. The striking white tie held together with a pearl. Pearl cufflinks against the crisp black dress shirt....

"Wow," Posy said from her sitting position on the carpet. "Peeta looks so handsome."

Their television screen filled with images of Katniss. Gale watched the TV along with his family, making comments with them and allowing

himself a split second fantasy that she was dressing that way for him. It was the last photo that brought him back to reality.

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The moonlight filtered through the window and left shadows dancing on the floor of Peeta's bedroom. 'Correction,' he thought to himself. 'Mine and Katniss' bedroom.' He looked down at his new wife's sleeping form from his sitting position on the bed and drank her in. Her hair fanned out around her face and down her shoulders. Her hand lay gingerly against the pillow next to her cheek, the tip of her nose resting on it, her lips slightly parted. Peeta reached out a finger and pulled away a piece of stray hair from her mouth. He couldn't believe she was here and never leaving. She was never going to leave him again. His heart ached with joy as he watched Katniss sleep for a few more minutes. He didn't want to get out of bed, but he knew he had to. There was business to take care of.

Peeta went down to his kitchen and tucked the documents Mayor Undersee had given him earlier into an envelope. He brought them up to his paint studio and looked around. He knew where to hide the pages, somewhere no one would bother to look. It took him an hour before he was satisfied with his work. By the time he was done, even his keen artistic eye had no clue that anything had been altered. He looked at the portraits in his makeshift studio and held the self portrait of himself at the age of eleven. He had wanted to give it to his mother, but it would be pointless. She'd never understand why he painted himself, let alone with a black eye, so he kept it. Katniss hated it. Effie on the other hand... Peeta grinned as he thought of the conversation that occurred in his studio right before Effie left District Twelve after the Victory Tour.

*"Why have you been looking at that picture for so long?" Katniss asked.*

*Effie studied the image before her and smiled softly. "It warms my heart."*

*"Are you crazy?" Katniss snapped. "That thing is sick. It's...it's repellent!"*

*"Quit your squawking," Haymitch groaned. "Effie's got a right to her opinion."*

*"Not when it's wrong, she doesn't!" Katniss walked through Peeta's spare bedroom towards the picture.*

*"Katniss, stop yelling at Effie," Peeta said quietly.*

*She turned sharply to face him and start arguing with him too, but he was giving her that look that said, 'you're acting like a spoiled child right now, Katniss.' "Well, I don't know why she likes it." Katniss crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Effie.*

*Effie let out a lilt of a breath and said, "What do you see when you look at this picture, Katniss?"*

*"Red!" Katniss spat out.*

*Effie's lilt of a laugh came out like a light breeze before she said, "I'm serious."*

*"You think I'm not?" Katniss asked.*

*"Fine," Effie turned to Haymitch and asked. "What do you see when you look at this?"*

*Haymitch walked up to it and rubbed his stomach then let out a loud belch. "A kid with a black eye. I'm guessing it's Peeta."*

*"Thank you Haymitch. Once again, may I remind you that the words excuse me are not required, but very much appreciated after a rude bodily function." Effie asked Katniss again. "Now, other than your own anger, what do you see when you look at this picture?"*

*Katniss stared at it then said, "A mother's sick idea of love."*

*"Peeta, I won't ask you to interpret your own work of art," Effie said. "That would be much too easy. Instead I shall tell you all what I see." She walked up to it and tilted her head. "When I first saw you painting this picture Peeta, I was a lot like Katniss. All I could see was my own fury, as well as pity for the boy in the picture, but now that I look at it...I notice something is different about it." She turned to Peeta and said, "You hadn't finished the eyes when I saw it originally. Before they were blank...there was no emotion in them, but now...they speak volumes." Effie let out a sigh and looked back at the painting. "When I look at this, I see a boy that loved a girl so much he'd risk everything for her." She turned and addressed both Katniss and Peeta. "I see courage...strength. I see love."*

*Katniss and Peeta just stood there looking at her. Unmoving. Unblinking.*

*"That is the beauty of art," Effie said. "Everyone views it in different ways."*

*"Well, I still see a kid with a black eye," Haymitch said. When none of them moved, Haymitch declared. "I need a drink. I'm gonna go tap into those bottles I snuck off of the train. I'm out of here." He walked up to the escort. "Effie, as always...it's been a pleasure." He took her hand in his and went to place a kiss on it, but let out another belch. Effie's*

*left eye closed, her nostrils flared and her lips pursed. "Excuse me," Haymitch said as though that would make it all better.*

*"I've come to the conclusion that there is no excuse for you, Haymitch." Effie pulled her hand out of his and wiped it on her jacket. "Try not to drown in your own vomit while you're here, hmmm?"*

*Haymitch started walking out of Peeta's room and wagged his finger at Effie. "You're gonna miss me Trinkie. You know you are."*

*"Yes," she said under her breath. "Like a dog misses fleas."*

*"Effie?" Peeta waited until his escort turned to face him. "Thank you."*

*"What ever for?"*

*Peeta took one of her gloved hands in his and said, "For seeing past the pain."*

*Effie looked at the picture of Peeta as a child and said, "How can you see pain when there's so much love in those eyes?"*

*"Peeta?" The sound of Katniss' voice pulled him from his memories.*

*"Hey," he went to her and held her hands in his. "Did you have a nightmare?"*

*"No," she shook her head. "I rolled over and you weren't there," she paused. "Did you have a nightmare?"*

*Peeta's heart felt like it was overflowing with jubilation. "No," he threaded his fingers through her hair and stepped closer to her. "But I'm pretty sure I'm dreaming." He had to be. "Katniss? Did yesterday really happen?"*



She placed her palms against his chest and lifted her face to his. "Yeah. It did." She said it as though she couldn't believe it herself. "You're my husband."

"My wife," Peeta kissed her. "Mrs. Katniss Mellark," he breathed against her lips and felt her whole body shudder.

"Say it again," she whispered hoarsely. Originally she hadn't wanted to take his name until she heard her new name rolling off of his tongue. The sound of it did wondrous things to her insides.

Peeta smiled before kissing her once more. He whispered into her mouth, "Mrs. Katniss Mellark." He heard her whimper and felt her fingers digging into his skin. He pulled her face away from his and stared into her stormy eyes, "I love you, Mrs. Katniss Mellark."

An hour later he watched once more as she slept, this time her arms were thrown above her head and her legs were tangled in the sheets. Peeta's eyes flashed to her mockingjay pin sitting on the nightstand. He thought of their toast. The things she had said to him...he couldn't believe what she had admitted to him...to herself in front of the fire. And when she gave him the locket, he understood why she had been so confused lately.

*"I have something for you." Katniss pulled the locket and the mockingjay pin out of her pocket and placed it next to the bread in front of the fireplace. "I know we can't wear wedding rings yet, but..." She held the locket in her hand. "This belonged to Haymitch's grandfather." She showed it to Peeta. "It's a locket."*

*Peeta looked at the piece of jewelry and studied the deep gold engraving of a bird. "That's not a mockingjay."*

*"No. It's a jabberjay." She ran her finger over the bird. "It reminds me of you."*

*Peeta let out a little laugh and said, "I remind you of a Capitol mutation?"*

*"Yes...no..." Katniss shook her head. "This isn't coming out right." She took a deep breath. "Jabberjays were known for their ability to use words...like you. When I think of the things you said during the Games...the things you told people to save my life..." She picked up her mockingjay pin. "The only reason the mockingjay exists is because of the jabberjay. That's you...I'm only alive because of you. So yes...you remind me of a Capitol mutation," she smiled. "One that refused to do their bidding." She placed the mockingjay against the engraving of the jabberjay and gave it a twist. The bird's wings aligned perfectly until she turned the pin, then they looked as though they were holding onto one another in flight. The latch on the locket clicked open and a photo appeared.*

*"Who are they?" Peeta looked at the old image inside of it.*

*"I think they're Haymitch's grandparents. I was going to take the picture out, but..." Katniss shrugged and said, "They belong in there. It's like...like this locket...this pin...they're more than just pieces of jewelry."*

*"They're symbols of the love those two shared," Peeta gave her a gentle smile.*

*"I knew that when I gave this to you and you put our pictures in here..." Katniss lifted her eyes to his. "It would be forever. We'd go on even after our deaths."*

*Peeta looked at the image of Haymitch's grandparents and said, "Like them."*

*"Yes." She closed the locket and put her pin down. She took a deep breath and placed the gold chain around his neck. "When you wear this...no matter where I am...you'll know that my love will always stay with you."*

*Peeta squeezed the locket in the palm of his hand. He wished he had something to give to her in return. He looked down and picked up her mockingjay pin, "I know someone else gave this to you, but...it has new meaning now." He fastened it to her shirt. "When you wear this...no matter where I am...you'll know that my love will always stay with you...always."*

*Katniss placed her hand around the pin and gave it a little squeeze before looking up at Peeta. "I love you, Peeta."*

*"I love you too, Katniss." There was just one more thing to say. Peeta smiled at her and proclaimed, "I now pronounce you my wife."*

*Katniss returned his loving gaze and said, "I now pronounce you my husband." They both let out a little breath, their fingers were doing dances with each others before Katniss said to him, "Peeta. Please kiss your bride."*

*Peeta picked up his sketchpad and opened up his pencil box. He didn't need to look at the subject of his sketch; it was burned into his mind forever. His fingers flew across the paper, his eyes only leaving the page to glance at the proper color pencils he'd need to complete the picture. When he was done he felt as though he had run ten miles at full speed. He set the picture down on the nightstand alongside of his phone and took Katniss in his arms. He closed his eyes and let the warmth of her body lull him into a peaceful sleep.*

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Cinna lifted the false bottom out of the trunk and placed the medicines inside of it, making sure to pack them tightly. He didn't want them sliding from side to side. It amazed him that Effie had gotten such miraculous drugs. She had thought that the items she had taken from the medical bay were only good for cosmetic improvements, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. Items that the Capitol residents used to remove wrinkles were actually a concentrated form of the medication Effie had sent to Peeta. A pea sized amount of the drug mixed with sterilized water could've been just as effective as the entire tube Effie had sent. Chemicals used to plump lips, when injected, could treat respiratory infections. It made Cinna sick to his stomach thinking of how wasteful his fellow residents were. They took everything for granted while so many people suffered. It was time for it to end, but the rebellion had been moving slowly as of late. People in the districts were being beaten within an inch of their lives, even more so than before, starvation was the norm and hope was dwindling. The nation needed something to inspire them to continue their fight against the Capitol's reign.

"Have you called Katniss?" Portia asked him as she entered the secret hideout in the Capitol.

"I've been trying, but I can't seem to get through," Cinna answered. "It doesn't even ring. I just keep getting a clicking sound on the other end of the line."

"That's odd," Portia bent down and began moving a few of the items around. "Here hand me that tub of cream."

"You don't think something happened out there, do you?" Cinna had been fretting about it since he found out they were to go to District Twelve to do the photo shoot yesterday.

"I doubt it. Plutarch would've told us if something had happened."

"Portia," Cinna stopped packing the supplies and let out a sigh. "Have you ever had a feeling like..." he looked down. "I can't seem to shake this feeling I have. Like something bad is going to happen."

Portia knew what he was talking about. She had been experiencing the same thing lately, but she wanted to encourage her friend. "Cinna, nothing bad is going to happen unless we oversleep and we're late tomorrow. Effie will never let us hear the end of it." She gave him a wicked grin. "Now stop worrying yourself and let's get this finished. I'm sure Tigris doesn't want to wait for us all night long." Cinna and Portia finished packing up the rest of the supplies and carried the trunk to Tigris' shop. On top of the false bottom inside of the trunk they packed the shoes that Katniss would be wearing. They also filled it with assorted superfluities from Tigris' shop, and then stopped at their own design studio to add the accessories the Capitol audience voted on. When it was almost overflowing they called for an attendant to help them take it back to Cinna's home. In the morning it would be taken along with the his fellow teammates on a train to District Twelve.

As Cinna walked amongst the prep teams towards Katniss' house, he tried to rid himself of the sullen feeling that seemed to be engulfing him since being rushed from the Capitol to District Twelve. They had already decided that they'd make the trip to District Twelve for the wedding shoot the following week, which would've given them plenty of time to get in contact with the other districts and receive updates on the rebellion's efforts there, but at the last minute everything changed by order of President Snow. This last minute change of events is what

threw everyone for a loop. No one could get in touch with Plutarch after they were told they were leaving. He was nowhere to be found. Effie tried to put all of their minds at ease by saying he did have a role to play as Head Gamemaker, but no one was comforted by her down to earth views.

Cinna knew that once he saw Katniss and Peeta he'd feel much better, but neither Katniss nor Peeta were at her house.

"Good morning!" Evelyn Everdeen greeted her unexpected guests. "What brings all of you here?"

"We're here to surprise Katniss with her wedding shoot," Octavia called out from the crowd. "We can't wait to see her and Peeta! We're just bursting with excitement!"

"Oh, yes...um..." Evelyn stammered. "Won't you come in?" She held the door open for them. "Look at this. You're all here. Every single one of you except...Where's Effie?"

"Effie went to Peeta's house," Cinna told her as he gave her a slight hug and placed a kiss against her cheek. "It's good to see you Evelyn," he said in his soft spoken voice.

"Peeta's house?" Her eyes grew huge.

"Yes. We thought we'd come here first for a little visit. Get the gang back together again," Portia smiled.

Cinna put his arm on Evelyn's shoulder and said softly, "Is everything all right, dear?" Evelyn gave her head a quick shake. "Is it Katniss?"

Evelyn leaned towards him as the entire group made their way into the living room, talking amongst themselves. "She's not here. She's at Peeta's."

"Oh, well I'm sure Effie will bring her by," Cinna said reassuringly.

"I don't think Effie Trinket is the right person to be going over there this morning." Evelyn was practically pleading with her eyes.

Cinna wasn't sure what was going on, but he could tell from the look of concern on Katniss' mother's face that he should be the one to fetch the girl. "I'm going to go get Haymitch. Portia," Cinna turned to his fellow stylist. "Don't let them out of that living room."

Cinna jogged across to Peeta's house calling out Effie's name, stopping her before she let herself into Peeta's home. "Effie, why don't you go wake Haymitch. I'll get Peeta."

"Don't be silly. I can wake Peeta. He's probably up already. That boy is up at the crack of dawn baking," she smiled at Cinna.

"Effie, dear. I think it's best that you wake Haymitch today. You'd be doing all of us a favor." It took some doing, but Effie finally agreed to go to the mentor's home in lieu of Peeta's. Cinna used the spare key Effie had given him for Peeta's front door and immediately saw why Katniss' mother had a look of panic on her face. "Oh, my." He tried not to smile, but he couldn't help himself. Something Portia had said awhile back popped out of his mouth. "The star-crossed-lovers are star-crossed no more." He walked through the kitchen, dumped the remnants of their meal into the trash and put the dishes in the sink. He made his way into the living room picking up a shoe here, a boot there and stray garments along the way. He wondered why there was a loaf of bread broken apart in front of the fireplace before he made his way up the stairs, picking up the last of their clothes and knocked on the

open bedroom door. "Peeta! Katniss! He received no response. He took a deep breath and thought, 'You've seen that girl in the nude before. This is no different,' but it was and he knew it. He looked to the side, avoiding the bed at all cost and continued to call out their names. Still they didn't answer. Finally he let his eyes drift to the pair. He was relieved to see Katniss sleeping in; obviously Peeta's pajama shirt since he was wearing the matching bottoms. They were cocooned against one another, Katniss' back pressed into Peeta's chest, his arms wrapped around her, her arms wrapped around his, even their legs were flush against the others. It broke Cinna's heart having to wake them up. He leaned over Katniss' sleeping form and gently shook her shoulder. "Wake up you wretched girl."

Katniss started slightly. "Cinna?" She blinked a few times and said his name again as though she were dreaming. "Cinna?"

"Katniss," Peeta mumbled. "I know we've only been married for a day, but are you seriously fantasizing about other men already?"

"Married?" Cinna asked with excitement in his voice. "Did you say married?"

Katniss and Peeta both shot upright and began talking at once.

"Cinna, what are you doing here?" Katniss began frantically pulling up the sheets, covering herself from him regardless of her history with her stylist.

"I was talking in my sleep. I didn't...Geez, Cinna! What the hell are you doing here?" Peeta hopped out of bed, opened up a drawer and pulled on a shirt.

"Where would you like these?" Cinna lifted the shoes and clothes he held in his arms.



Peeta collected them from him, dropping a shoe in the process. "Why are you here?"

"Peeta, grab me something to put on." Katniss was flattening out her hair which was in a terrible state.

"Where's your bag?" Peeta asked her.

"I don't know...downstairs I think," she answered. "Just give me that stuff."

Peeta looked at the clothes he held in his arms and said, "You can't wear this."

"Oh...right. Um..."

"Where's your bag? I'll get it for you?" Cinna tried to keep from laughing at the entire scenario, but he couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped from his lips.

"Don't!" Katniss looked like she was on the verge of tears. "Don't laugh at me."

"Oh, you sweet child," Cinna went to her and placed a kiss against her forehead. "I'm not laughing at you. I'm just happy for you." He looked over at Peeta and said, "Congratulations." He picked up Katniss' hand and gave it a pat. "Married, huh? Makes this trip a bit pointless though."

"Why did you make the trip, Cinna?" Peeta asked as he dumped his and Katniss' clothes in a hamper.

"Your wedding shoot." Cinna stood up and said, "I'm assuming you've tried on your dresses, Katniss?" Cinna laughed when she gave him a guilty look. "Peeta did you try on your tuxes?"

"Yeah. They fit."

"You did?" Katniss appeared to be surprised by this bit of news.

"Of course I did. Why wouldn't I?" Peeta pulled out some pants from a drawer.

"Why don't I go get that suitcase for you, Katniss?" Cinna offered.

"That's okay. I'll just go change in the downstairs bathroom." She got up and padded towards the bedroom door.

"Hey, wait," Peeta called to her. He gave Cinna a quick look then headed to Katniss' side. "I know this isn't the way we planned on starting our first day of wedded bliss, but...look at the bright side...Cinna's here." He gave her a soft kiss against her lips. "Now go get dressed before Effie shows up in our bedroom."

"Oh, God," Katniss rolled her eyes. "Could you imagine if it had been Effie?" She went downstairs to change. Peeta turned to Cinna and they both started laughing as they heard Katniss doing her Effie Trinket impersonation, "Really, Katniss. I know you're married, but must you continue to think of menswear as the height of fashion? Men's pajamas..."

"I'm very glad I got to Effie before she made it into your door," Cinna said with a smile.

Peeta let out a sigh of relief and said, "Me too."

"So," Cinna stood up. "You two couldn't wait for an April wedding?"

"We didn't want to get married at the Capitol. I mean...we'll go through the motions there, but at least this way we'll know it's just a show. Our wedding won't be tainted."

"Give me details. When did this happen? And How?" Cinna wondered if they just had a little family gathering and exchanged some vows or if it was the real deal.

"Katniss and I are friends with the mayor's daughter so he did us a favor." Peeta turned quickly towards Cinna and said, "But you can't say anything. He'll get in a lot of trouble for..."

Cinna lifted his palms up and said, "Your secret is safe with me, though I do think Effie will be hurt if you don't tell her."

Peeta let out a breath and said, "Effie and Portia and that's it. No one else can know. No one."

Cinna shook his head a little, "I can't believe this. You two are really..."

Peeta grinned and said, "We're legally married."

"Wow." Cinna gave Peeta heartfelt congratulations. "Then this is cause for celebration." Cinna paused. "Listen, everyone is waiting at Katniss' place. Why don't I give them a call and let them know we're on our way, so they don't come over here looking for us?"

"Sure," Peeta called out from his bathroom. "Phone's on the nightstand." He came back out and said, "Hey Cinna, any clue how to get out a grape juice stain? I spilled it on Katniss' favorite shirt last night."

"Soak it in cold water, then a mixture of laundry soap and vinegar." Cinna picked up the phone, made the call to Katniss' house and settled down a frantic Effie who was concerned about staying on schedule, then hung up. He picked up Peeta's sketchpad and looked at the work of art the young man had created.

"Peeta?" Cinna asked.

"Yeah," he walked out of the bathroom looking fresh as a daisy. "What is this?"

Peeta smiled and took it from Cinna's hand. "Like that?"

"I love it."

"Here, let me show you the originals." Peeta held out the locket he was wearing. "Of course, you know Katniss' pin." Peeta picked it up off of the nightstand and held them side by side. "They're a matching set. I combined the two and added some...flare."

"This is absolutely stunning." Cinna was in awe of the boy's talent. "May I study this while I'm here today?"

Peeta ripped the page out of the book and handed it to him. "Take it. I can always draw another one."

Cinna stared at the picture. A mockingjay and a jabberjay, both in flight, both with their wings spread out, yet they looked as though they were embracing one another...that they were somehow intertwined. Their heads were lifted towards the sky, one slightly above the other, but you couldn't determine which was which and they were surrounded, not by the gold ring on Katniss' brooch or etched into Peeta's locket, but a circle of startling orange, blazing red and a hint of gold. The birds were encircled by a ring of fire. The entire image took Cinna's breath away. He held the sketch against his chest and told himself to hide the image as soon as he left Peeta's home. Cinna knew he had found what he had been searching for.

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Katniss was sick of being manipulated into different pairs of shoes. She wanted to go home and put her feet up.

"Just a few more, dear," Effie's shrill Capitol accent said to her for the millionth time that day. "Maybe it would go quicker if when you smiled you didn't look like you wanted to eat the cameraman," Effie's voice was dripping with sugary sweet annoyance.

"Fine," Katniss grit her teeth and forced a smile. She had been stuffed into six dresses; her hair was being changed with each one along with headpieces, bracelets, earrings... "Is Peeta going through this kind of hell too?"

"No darling," Effie walked into the kitchen and picked up a cup of something to take a sip. "He's been done for a couple of hours now."

"What?" Katniss' head snapped around and stared at her escort. She wanted to beat her with the puffy lavender wig sitting atop her head. "This is bull!" Katniss got up and stormed into her living room. She plopped herself down on the rocker, smacked the flowers she was holding into her lap and wiped at her forehead, but the pearls at her wrist caught on some hair and yanked it from the pins that were holding it in. 'Good,' she thought. 'Maybe they'll leave me alone now.' Her foot was killing her so she pulled the heel out of the shoe and let it dangle off of her foot. Oh, how she wanted to see Peeta...to really give him a piece of her mind for not having to go through the hell she did for their wedding. She rolled her eyes at the thought of the Capitol's wedding. 'If only you knew,' she thought to herself. Katniss heard her front door open and the sound of Peeta and Portia's laughter filtering in. She turned her head to glare at her espoused, but when she did he was beaming at her as though she were the only person in the room.

She could read his lips as he mouthed to her, "Mrs. Katniss Mellark," and everything inside of her melted. He walked closer to her and the whole world disappeared. She no longer felt the pain of the high heels she had been forced to wear throughout the day, nor did she hear the cameraman when he yelled out for her not to move. The flashes of light never fazed her. The man snapping pictures of her from different angles was nonexistent. All Katniss saw were the stunning blue eyes of the man she adored. 'I love you, Peeta,' she thought to herself as Cinna placed a hand on her shoulder and told her she was finally done.

The team from District Twelve entered Victor's Village like a tornado. One minute they were there and the next they were gone taking with them the wedding dresses and tuxedos they had sent to Katniss and Peeta as well as a gift for Effie Trinket.

"I'm glad you gave her that picture," Katniss stood at her mother's kitchen sink washing the dishes. "I know she liked it, but...I really hated it."

Peeta wrapped the dishtowel around her waist and said, "After what you told me," he whispered into her ear, "during our toasting, you mean to say you still view that picture the same way?"

"Guess I feel guilty." Katniss admitted to him. "I always felt like it was my fault your mom did that to you."

"It was my mom's fault she did that to me," Peeta kissed her cheek. "So...he released the dishtowel and asked. "Do you really think they've got our wedding pictures ready to go already?"

"Prim seems to think so. Why else would they have a required broadcast tonight?" Katniss answered him.

"Then hurry up and finish those, I want to see how badly you were tortured," Peeta laughed at her as she flicked soap suds at him.

"Come on you two," Prim called from the living room. "They're going to start soon."

Katniss washed the last few plates and rinsed out the sink. "All right...let's go watch the star-crossed lovers."

Peeta grinned and said, "I've always been a big fan of theirs. I hear the guy is a real charmer."

Katniss rolled her eyes at him and sat next to him on the sofa. They watched as Caesar Flickerman introduced their stylists. "I'm surprised they don't have Effie up there too," Katniss commented.

"She didn't design anything. Why would she be up there?" Peeta said to her.

They listened as Caesar, Cinna and Portia made idle talk about their upcoming Capitol wedding. All the while Katniss and Peeta kept exchanging secret smiles with one another. Then the photos of Peeta started airing.

"Wow," Katniss turned to him. "I'm marrying a good looking guy."

"I'd argue with you, but...you're right," Peeta gave her a good natured smile.

Then Katniss sucked in her breath when she saw the last photo of Peeta in the all black tuxedo. "Oh, my." She leaned forward in her seat. "Oh, Peeta."

"That's my favorite too," he watched Katniss instead of the television screen.

"If that Capitol audience has any brains they'll pick that one," Katniss said as she leaned back against him. She tugged on his hand as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

Then images of Katniss started to appear before them. Peeta teased her as she complained through every photo they showed. "You mean you didn't like practically suffocating in a tight dress?"

"That cameraman made me suck in my breath and hold it for almost a minute. I wanted to punch him," Katniss glowered at the memory of the torturous photo shoot.

When the final picture was shown Prim said, "Oh my goodness."

"When..." Katniss stared at the screen then looked at Peeta. "When did they take that picture of me?"

Peeta shook his head and said a quiet, "I don't know, but I definitely need a copy of that one." He held onto the locket and saw the hint of a smile play across Katniss' lips.

They weren't paying attention to Caesar Flickerman until the words, "Quarter Quell," came out of his mouth. Once they heard it their focus was on the television screen.

"What will they do? It isn't for months yet?" Prim asked.

All eyes turned to Evelyn whose expression was distant. "It's probably the reading of the card."

Katniss and Peeta exchanged looks with one another.

President Snow began to speak after the nation's anthem was played explaining the reason for the Quarter Quell and all Katniss could think was how much she despised the man. He was standing on a stage,



talking about the Hunger Games being a reminder...a punishment to the rebels for fighting against the Capitol. 'You haven't seen a rebellion yet, Snow,' Katniss thought to herself. 'When we're through fighting you, you'll wish all you had to face were twenty-three tributes in an arena.' Katniss actually thought putting Snow in the Games would be a good idea as his punishment for all the hell he'd put the districts through over the years. President Snow spoke about the districts having to vote on which tributes had to enter the first Quarter Quell and Katniss thought it would be horrible to have to pick a child to face their death. Then he spoke of the second Quarter Quell, Haymitch's. Katniss felt Peeta gripping her hand.

"I had a friend that went that year," Katniss' mother spoke without thinking. "Maysilee Donner. Her parents owned a shop in town. They gave me her songbird after. A canary."

Peeta pulled Katniss closer to him and Katniss gripped her pin.

"And now we honor our third Quarter Quell..." President Snow began.

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The next photos were of Katniss in flowing white dresses, standing alone with flowers surrounding her, looking over her shoulder at the camera, at something in the distance... There were six different dresses, but multiple poses. Gale thought she looked stunning in every gown she wore. For a second he thought, 'That's the one I'd want you to wear for our wedding, Catnip.' "I have to admit, her stylist is good. Really good. I'm not sure how they're going to choose which dress she should..." Gale stopped mid-sentence. Katniss was on screen draped in pearls from head to toe and the look on her face was like nothing he'd ever seen before. She was sitting on a rocking chair

in her living room, a bouquet of flowers were in her lap as though they were being disregarded, the heel of one foot was peeking out of her shoe, her shoulders were a bit drooped, like she had been exhausted from the day's events, a few pieces of her hair had been pulled from its perfect coil atop her head but her eyes...her eyes... Gale didn't have to be in the room to hear her saying the words, 'I love you,' to Peeta.

Gale had expected to be flooded with heartache at the final image of Katniss in a wedding dress, but something else happened. He found himself feeling content. Katniss had found what she swore she'd never succumb to. She was completely and utterly in love and Gale was actually happy for her. He looked over at his mother who was staring at him and said, "That Peeta's a lucky guy."

Hazelle smiled proudly at her son and said, "Yes, he is."

Caesar Flickerman continued with, "Let's get Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark to their wedding in style!" He paused for a brief second then continued with, "We have one more big event this evening. That's right, this year will be the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Hunger Games and that means it's time for our third Quarter Quell!"

"That thing is months away and they're already promoting it?" Gale grit his teeth as he thought of his little brother standing in the Town Square on Reaping Day.

"They'll probably do the reading of the card." Hazelle sat at the end of her seat.

Gale couldn't help but notice his mother's worried frown as her eyes darted between Rory and the television set. The nation's anthem finished playing and the man Gale hated more than anything in the world walked onto the stage.

President Snow began his speech about the Dark Days from which the Hunger Games were born. "When the laws for the Hunger Games were laid out, it was dictated that every twenty-five years the anniversary would be marked by a Quarter Quell." Snow's treacherous leer filled the screen. "...a special version of the Games to help us to remember why they are such an intricate part of our heritage. To remind the districts about the needless rebellion that ultimately killed so many."

Gale wanted to be sick. It was as though Snow was sending a message to each district telling them to stop fighting for what they believed in. Ironical considering the information Peeta gave to Gale so long ago in the woods about the rebellion being rekindled in their nation right now.

"On the twenty-fifth anniversary," President Snow continued. "as a reminder to the rebels that their children were dying because of their choice to initiate violence, every district was made to hold an election and vote on the tributes who would represent it."

"That's sick," Gale muttered under his breath.

"On the fiftieth anniversary," the president went on, "as a reminder that two rebels died for each Capitol citizen, every district was required to send twice as many tributes."

"That's the year, Haymitch won," Hazelle said absently.

President Snow looked to be enjoying this too much as far as Gale was concerned. The president removed a yellowish envelope from a box a little boy was holding to his side. "And now we honor our third Quarter Quell."

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President Snow opened up the little envelope that held the law for that year's Quarter Quell and read, "On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest amongst them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors."

Gale could feel the bile rising to his throat. The Capitol had found a way to get rid of Katniss and Peeta without making themselves look evil in the eyes of their viewing audience. Hell, they'd probably cheer their deaths on. Gale's dinner plate crashed to the floor as he ran out of his house and towards Victor's Village.

Effie Trinket stood next to the stage at the City Center and listened as the president of their nation sent her entire world into a tailspin. Katniss and Peeta...her kids were going back into the arena only this time, Effie knew if either one of them died, she'd die right along with them, just like Haymitch in his Quell.

Haymitch Abernathy had known before the show was even on the air why it was required viewing, but he didn't have the heart to tell Katniss and Peeta. When he heard what the rules for that year's Quell were going to be, he instantly knew why. Guilt washed over him as he thought to himself, 'Seneca should've let them die in the arena the way they wanted to.'

Snow's words kept echoing through Peeta's head, "...*the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors.*" He could hear the squeals and cries coming from Katniss' family, but he couldn't rip his eyes away from the television screen until he heard Katniss' gasp. He felt as though someone had let all of the air out of his lungs.

It took Katniss a few seconds to process what she was hearing, but once it hit her she sucked in a sharp breath. Her eyes flashed to Peeta's. They were going back into the arena. Not as the Star Crossed Lovers of District Twelve, but as husband and wife.

**Author's Note: Want to know what was said during the toasting? Then you must keep reading the stories as they will be coming to you via flashback. Whether or not the toasting will be in this story or Mockingjay...I will never tell!**

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter**

### **14, a hunger games**

### **fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Thirteen: The Birth of an Uprising**

**Katniss and Peeta have gotten married and Snow has just read the laws for the third Quarter Quell announcing the the tributes will be reaped from the existing pool of victors.**

**Thank you so much for the amazing reviews. They might not seem like much to you, but to all of us that take the time to write these stories, reviews mean the world to us. On behalf of all of the authors that write fanfic I ask you to remember to take the time to let them know you appreciate them.**

**To my betas, S and A, you two are amazing. I can honestly say this story would not be the same without you two. A thank you for taking the time out of your vacation to beta for me and S thank you for the reaping day idea. Now it's time to read...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Katniss' whole body was shaking at the thought of being in the arena again. Images of the tributes she and Peeta had killed flashed through her mind. She saw herself shooting an arrow through Marvel's throat, remembering how detached she had been from her actions at the time. All she had wanted was vengeance for Rue's death. Now when she thought about it...had nightmares about it, she was flooded with remorse over murdering someone's child in cold blood. She was a murderer. "I..." she could barely choke any words out. "Air." Peeta's arms were wrapped around her so tightly, he dropped them. She had to get out of the house. She couldn't breathe. She stood in the street, placed her hands on her knees and tried to suck in a breath, but her lungs felt like they were burning with each little pant she took.

"Katniss," Peeta's voice was shaking. "It'll be..." He couldn't even finish his statement of false encouragement. He had no clue how everything would be all right. They were back in the Games. Well, she was for certain, he had a fifty/fifty shot of being reaped. It didn't really matter; he knew he'd be going back in the arena with her. Keeping her safe was his main priority. If Haymitch's name was called, Peeta would

volunteer. It was that simple. "Haymitch!" Peeta called out as his eyes darted to his mentor's home. "Katniss, we need to check on him."

She could hear Peeta talking, but she didn't want to listen. Everything sounded muffled, like when she swam underwater at the lake. There was a strange sound coming from somewhere, a throaty whimper. It took Katniss a moment to realize that the noise was coming from her. Peeta put his hands on her upper arms and squeezed. She could see him talking to her, but she couldn't hear him. She shook her head trying to clear the clouds from her brain. "Wha...what?"

"We need to check on Haymitch, Katniss."

Katniss' eyes flashed to Haymitch's house. She was going to have to watch him die or worse kill him herself if he was in the arena with her. She just nodded her head and slugged alongside of Peeta through their village. When they got to Haymitch's door Katniss just stood there. "I...I need a minute." She didn't know where her voice came from. She was sure she had lost it.

"We'll wait." Peeta could see that Katniss was about to lose it. Hell, he was about to lose it, but the more she crumbled, the stronger he knew he had to be.

"No," Katniss shook her head. "Check on him before he does something stupid." She had no clue how Haymitch would react to the news.

Peeta didn't want to leave her standing there. "Please...just come inside with me? You can stand by the front door. I'll leave it open."

"I can't. Not yet." Katniss looked at him and said, "I only need a minute or two for myself, Peeta. Please?" She couldn't think, could barely

breathe; her whole world was crumbling around her. "I need to be alone."

It was the hardest thing he'd ever agreed to let her do. "Okay, Katniss." Peeta kissed her forehead. He began walking into Haymitch's house, turned and said to her, "Do not leave Victor's Village." He was petrified she'd try to run into the woods again. Even though the fence was turned on, he knew his Katniss could somehow find a way to get in.

Katniss just nodded her head. "Go." The second Peeta closed Haymitch's door behind him, Katniss crumbled to the ground. Her tears began flowing, hot, fast and free. Her throat closed up and her whole body felt like it was convulsing. Her first instinct was to run to the woods. She got up and let her feet guide her, but she stopped at the exit of Victor's Village, hearing Peeta's pleas for her not to leave their little neighborhood in her head and turned around. She looked at her surroundings and before she knew it she was on all fours in the cellar of one of the empty houses. She didn't know how she got in there, she didn't care. She balled up the shirt she was wearing, shoved it into her mouth and let out the screams she had been holding in since realizing that she and Peeta would be going back into the arena, because she knew, regardless of whether or not Haymitch's name was called, that she'd be battling to the death against her husband.

Peeta found Haymitch sitting on a kitchen chair downing a bottle of white liquor and rubbing his sleeve under his nose. Peeta didn't even wait to see how his mentor was doing before he declared, "I'm going in. You hear me, old man? I'm going in and she's coming out." Peeta stood in front of him and pointed a finger at him. "You're bringing her home." Haymitch just looked up at Peeta with an empty stare. "I need you to swear it to me, Haymitch." Peeta reached out and pulled his



mentor up by the arms so he was standing in front of him. "Swear it!" He hadn't meant to shake Haymitch, but in doing so he seemed to snap the man out of his funk.

"I can't do that this time," Haymitch blinked slowly. "I'm going in. It's my turn to protect her. She'll win and then you can both live."

"You?" Peeta let out a noise somewhere between a burst of air and a laugh. "You'll get killed in the first minute. Look at you."

"One less tribute she'll have to kill," Haymitch pushed away from Peeta and sat back down. "Don't ask me to let you die in there kid."

Peeta needed to get through to Haymitch before Katniss walked in on them. There was only one way he knew how. "Haymitch, I know you would've died for Maysilee." The look of shock on his mentor's face didn't stop Peeta from continuing on. "You loved her. You've been beating yourself up for twenty-five years because she died and you didn't." Peeta knelt in front of Haymitch and said, "Let me do what you couldn't. Let me save the woman I love."

Haymitch's eyes began tearing. It took a few minutes, but Haymitch finally agreed to Peeta's request. He wiped at his tears with the back of his hands and said, "I swear it, kid. I'll get her out of there."

Peeta knew it was taking a lot out of Haymitch for him to do such a thing. The man hadn't had any family left since the Capitol killed them off and now that he finally allowed himself to get close to people again Haymitch had to choose which one of them lived or died, Katniss or Peeta.

Peeta gripped the man's hand that was holding his liquor bottle and just held on. He sat for a few minutes then said, "I better get Katniss. She's getting some air." Peeta walked to Haymitch's front door and

opened it to find no one on the other side. His heart sank into the pit of his stomach. He ran to his mother in law's house and opened the door to find his new family in tears. He went up to them with open arms and they both ran to him. He held onto them, wishing he could take their pain away. He placed a kiss on the top of each of their heads and asked, "Did she go upstairs?"

Prim shook her head. "She left with you," she said between soft sobs.

"She probably went home," Peeta gave them one last squeeze and said, "I better go to her." He went into their house, but it was dark and still. That feeling of dread he had the day she went into the woods was coming over him again as he walked through their empty domicile calling out her name. "Katniss! Katniss!" When he got no answer he rushed outside towards Haymitch's house. "Is she here? Is Katniss here?"

"No, kid," Haymitch wiped his hand under his nose and took a swallow from a new bottle of liquor.

Peeta slammed his hand against the wall and yelled out, "Son of a bitch! Why did I leave her out there? Why?"

Haymitch stood up, his body tilting to the side, "I'll help you find her, kid."

"No. Stay here. She might come here." Peeta quickly left his mentor's house and saw a tall figure entering Victor's Village. As he hurried towards him, he yelled out, "Gale! Did you see her? Did you see Katniss?"

Gale shook his head and said, "No."

They met up in the middle of the village. Gale quiet and forlorn. Peeta frantic and calling out into the night. "Katniss! Katniss!"

Katniss could hear the faint cry of her name through the walls of her surroundings. She tried to answer, knowing it was Peeta, but her muffled screams left her with no voice. She tried to stand, but her legs gave out on her as another round of sobs consumed her. Her mind was going a mile a minute. 'Victors are supposed to be out of the reaping for life. We're not supposed to go back into the Games. Oh, this is just too perfect, Snow...a little too convenient. I've got to give you credit though...I never saw this one coming. Kill me...kill my family... take Peeta away from me...hell, public torture... I expected all of those things, but this...not in a million years. Victors are supposed to be the embodiment of hope where there is none and now twenty-three of us will be killed to show how even that hope was an illusion.' Katniss no longer heard voices calling out to her. She knew Peeta would be worried sick about her. She forced herself to stand, stumbled around the dark and empty house and found her way up to the kitchen. It was there that she saw the shattered pieces of glass and noticed the blood on her hand. She walked out into the village and saw Haymitch's window wide open, 'Peeta will be looking for me there. He knows I won't want my family to see the state I'm in,' she thought to herself as she made her way to her mentor's house.

"You don't make it easy on the boy. He's been here looking for you," Haymitch said to her as she made her way through his dreary house.

"He'll find me." Katniss sat on the chair next to him.

"So what'd ya come here to say, sweetheart?" Haymitch began mimicking Katniss' voice, "Take his place, Haymitch, because all things being equal, I'd rather Peeta had a crack at the rest of his life than you?"

Katniss bit her lip when she heard Haymitch's words. In her heart she knew what he was saying was the truth. She looked at her mentor, the condition he was in and said to him, "I came for a drink." She needed something to wash away her pain even if it was only temporarily.

Haymitch busted out laughing and slammed his bottle down in front of her. "Have at it, sweetheart."

She wiped the top of the bottle off with her sleeve and took a couple of gulps, choking and sputtering on the last one. She could feel the fiery sensation of the alcohol burning through her system and she had to admit, she liked it. Her twisted life was becoming a hazy, improbable dream. "Maybe it should be you. You hate life anyway."

"Very true," Haymitch pointed at her. "And since last time I tried to keep you alive...seems like I'm obligated to save the boy this time."

"That's another good point," Katniss took another long swallow.

"Problem here, sweetheart..." Haymitch turned to face her, "...Peeta's got a pretty good argument. Since I did choose you last time, I owe him and..."

"You didn't choose me! He did!" Katniss unintentionally yelled at him. She took a breath and began to feel her head starting to sway. "Peeta was the one that chose me in the arena," her voice was much calmer now.

"Another good point, but..." Haymitch sat back in his chair. "I chose you before he ever said a thing to me," Haymitch confessed.

Katniss studied her mentor and asked, "Is that true?"

"Yeah, sweetheart. It is." The room was uncomfortably still until Haymitch broke the silence. "He wants the chance to go back in to protect you."

Katniss sighed. This news didn't come as a surprise to her, but hearing it hurt like hell. "He's always putting me first." She chastised herself for running away again and making Peeta worry.

"You could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve him, you know," Haymitch glanced at her.

It wasn't the first time he had said that to her, but it sure hit the hardest. "Yeah, I know." Katniss could feel the full effect of the alcohol taking its toll on her. "No question, he's the superior one in this trio." If she hadn't been so drunk she would've been proud to say that. Peeta was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the best human being she had ever known. "So...what are you going to do?"

Haymitch sighed and said, "I don't know. Go back in with you maybe...if I can. If my name's drawn at the reaping it won't matter. He'll just volunteer to take my place."

It made Katniss sick to her stomach when she thought to herself, 'Please Effie, call out Peeta's name again.' She knew Haymitch would volunteer to go in for him so she and Peeta would have a chance at a life together, but it would be devastating for Haymitch to go back into the Games. "It'd be bad for you in the arena, wouldn't it? Knowing all the others?"

"Oh, I think we can count on it being unbearable wherever I am." Haymitch nodded his head at the bottle and said, "Can I have that back now?"

Katniss gripped it tightly and slurred, "No." She took another few little sips as Haymitch opened up a fresh bottle for himself and said, "Haymitch?" Her voice was pleading. "Peeta was right when he said you and I are alike." She had to make her case to him. She had to make sure Haymitch saved Peeta's life. "What do you think would happen to me if he died out there and I came back?" Haymitch just looked at her. "I think we both know this district doesn't need two alcoholic mentors. I'd never forgive myself, Haymitch." She turned to him and said, "You have to save him."

"Sweetheart, he's going to..."

Katniss pulled her mockingjay pin off of her shirt and slammed it onto the table. "I cannot go through what you went through with Maysilee! What you're going through because of the arena! Peeta is strong enough to survive without me, but..." Katniss could feel the tears stinging the back of her nose. "...I'm not. I can't live without him. Even if my life is spared out there and he dies..." she reached her hand out and placed it on Haymitch's. "I'll die too. I'll never leave the arena."

Haymitch placed his hand over Katniss' and squeezed it. He picked up the pin and placed it back in her hand. "Put this back on." He watched her as she tried to fasten the pin to her shirt. It took several tries. "Okay, sweetheart. If he goes back in, I'll save him."

"Swear it, Haymitch." Katniss stood up and felt the earth spinning. "I need you to promise me that you'll keep him alive out there."

"I promise, sweetheart."

"M'kay..." Katniss mumbled as she weaved her way out of Haymitch's house holding onto her bottle of liquid courage. She saw Peeta and a taller, darker Peeta walking towards her. Heard them calling out her

name. "Peeeeetaaa," she waved the bottle in the air at him...'both of hims,' she giggled to herself.

"Katniss, what the hell?" Peeta and Gale jogged up to her.

"Peeta." He was only a few yards away from her, or at least she thought he was. The other Peeta was only a few feet away from her too, but he was much taller and had darker hair, she preferred the shorter one. "I don't feel too good." The bottle crashed to the ground as she leaned towards the closest Peeta to her.

Gale's arms grabbed Katniss before she hit the ground.

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Gale ran as fast as his legs could take him towards Victor's Village only slowing down once the entrance was in sight. He walked around the corner and saw Peeta standing in the middle of the street. He wondered what he was doing out there instead of being by Katniss' side.

"Gale! Did you see her? Did you see Katniss?" Peeta called to him.

"No," Gale hadn't seen anyone on his run into town, but he hadn't been paying attention. "Did you check her house?"

"Of course I did," Peeta snapped. "She's not there." His eyes flew around scanning the mansions that surrounded them. "Are you sure you didn't see her?"

"I'm pretty sure, but...Peeta I wasn't really looking," Gale admitted.

"Katniss!" Peeta cupped his hands around the sides of his mouth and began jogging around the village screaming out her name. "Katniss! Where are you? Katniss!"

Gale began going in the opposite direction of Peeta calling out to her too. "Catnip! Catnip!"

Peeta turned towards Gale and called out, "I'm going to search the back of the houses. You stay out front and keep looking."

Gale walked up to each house and screamed out her name, but he got no reply. Several minutes later Peeta came from behind him. "Nothing?" Gale asked.

Peeta shook his head and rubbed his palms forcefully against his eyes. "She swore she wouldn't do this again. Damn it, Katniss! You promised!"

Gale had no clue what he was talking about, but he knew they had to find her. "Look, maybe she went to her old house or to the woods."

"She can't get into the woods. The fence is on." Peeta looked around once more and said, "She'd find a way through..."

"Come on," Gale started making his way out of Victor's Village. "We'll go check. I'll search by the woods and you can check her old house."

"Okay," Peeta said on a breathy reply. About midway to their destinations he stopped and said, "No." He began shaking his head. "Gale, she's not out here."

"I'm telling you, Peeta, she probably..."



"No, Gale!" Peeta stopped him from talking. "She's upset, but she wouldn't do this to me again. I know she wouldn't. We have to go back."

Gale thought he was insane. He was sure if Catnip had run away it would be to the places she was familiar with. "Peeta, trust me when I say, I know her and she's probably in the Seam right now."

Peeta glared at Gale and said, "You think I don't know her? You want to waste your time, go ahead, but I'm going back. She's there. I can feel it." He headed back home.

Gale was tempted to prove him wrong, but something inside of him said that Peeta had proven on multiple occasions that he knew a part of Katniss Gale never did, so he followed. They jogged into the village and Gale was the first to see her. He started running towards her saying, "There she is. Catnip! Hey, Catnip!"

"Katniss! Katniss!" Gale heard Peeta calling from a few feet behind him. He saw Katniss waving a bottle and heard her calling out to Peeta in response. "Katniss, what the hell?" Gale heard Peeta's voice from behind him.

For some reason Katniss was looking at Gale when she said, "Peeta, I don't feel too good."

Gale saw the glass bottle crashing to the ground and scooped Katniss in his arms before she could follow suit. Her head was hanging back, her arms dangling to the sides and she reeked of booze. "She's drunk."

Peeta looked at Katniss then the broken shards of glass at their feet. "I'm going to kick Haymitch's ass." He held out his arms and said, "I'll take her."

Gale didn't want to let her go. Even if this was all he had, he wanted it. "That's okay. I can carry her."

Peeta let out a little sigh and asked, "Mind carrying her home for me?"

"Nah," Gale turned towards Katniss' house only to be stopped by Peeta's voice.

"Gale." Peeta walked up to him and said, "She doesn't live there anymore."

For a second Gale was completely confused. He wondered if Katniss had gotten assigned a new house in the village for some reason, then it hit him. "Oh." Gale followed Peeta towards his house and walked in behind him. His eyes scanned the layout and found signs of Katniss everywhere. A couple of pairs of shoes by the door, her winter coat hanging on a coat rack, a white shirt hanging over one of the kitchen chairs. He could hear his footsteps echoing up the steps as Peeta led him to a bedroom. Gale wasn't sure what he was feeling when Peeta pulled down the blankets and told him to lay Katniss there.

"She cut her hand," Peeta picked it up and saw blood drying. "Would you mind going into the bathroom for me and getting me a warm washcloth?" He asked Gale.

Gale moved without thinking. He was in a daze. He could hear Peeta talking to someone from the other room, but he wasn't sure who it was. Gale opened up the linen closet and took out a cloth then began to wet it. He noticed two toothbrushes sitting in a holder next to the sink, two bars of soap. He picked up one and sniffed at it, but there was no scent. He lifted the other and the smell of lavender filled his nose. He dried his hands off and saw a small container holding the bands that Katniss used at the end of her braid. 'She lives here,' he

thought to himself. 'She lives with Peeta.' Gale walked out of the bathroom and saw Peeta hanging up the phone.

"Thanks," Peeta took the warm cloth from him and began gently wiping away at the dried blood around Katniss' hand.

"Sure," Gale didn't know what to do with himself. He felt completely out of place.

"Would you mind getting me her pajamas?" Peeta looked up at Gale. "They're in the top drawer of that dresser." Peeta motioned with his chin.

"Yeah...yeah," Gale opened the drawer only he didn't find anything that looked like something Catnip would wear to bed. "Peeta? This has your clothes in it."

"Yeah. Sorry about that." Peeta gave his head a little shake and said, "Just grab one of those pajama shirts."

Gale pulled out a shirt and walked it over to Peeta. He watched as Peeta examined Katniss' hand. Gale was relieved to see that the cut wasn't deep, but his stomach flopped when Peeta turned her hand over and kissed the palm of it. Gale could hear footsteps entering the room. He turned to find Katniss mother and sister. He had to wonder why her mother would allow this. He knew they were engaged, but...living together?

"Oh, thank goodness, she's here." Evelyn went up to Peeta. "Is it bad?"

"No, but I think she might have a piece of glass in there," Peeta answered.

Prim opened up a bag and said, "I've got tweezers in here mom."

Gale watched as they, examined her hand, applied some ointment and bandaged it up. He felt like an outsider looking in as they all worked together. Peeta got a basin full of water and a fresh cloth; he took the pajama shirt from Gale and set it on the nightstand. Prim took off her boots and socks and Katniss' mother cleaned up the remnants of the items they used to care for her wound. "I think I'm going to go," Gale said from a distant corner of the room.

Peeta turned to him and said, "No. I'd like to talk to you. Would you mind staying?"

Gale had no clue what Peeta wanted to talk to him about; he could only assume it had something to do with going back into the arena and Katniss. For that reason alone Gale agreed to stay. "Yeah. I can stick around."

"Thanks," Peeta turned to Prim and said, "Maybe you can make Gale a cup of tea while I clean Katniss up for bed?"

"Sure, Peeta." Prim gave him a soft, sad smile.

Gale was sure Katniss' mother was going to stay and help Peeta, but she didn't. She went downstairs with them and made two cups of tea, one for her and one for Peeta, then took it up to him. A few minutes later she called down the stairs to Prim. Gale wasn't sure what to do, so he followed the girl. When he walked in the bedroom, Katniss was tucked under the covers wearing the shirt Gale had pulled out for her to wear, her hair was brushed out of its braid and her skin looked dewy.

"Thought you'd want to say goodnight to Katniss," Peeta gave Prim a halfhearted smile.

Prim went over to her sleeping sister and kissed her forehead.  
"Goodnight, Katniss. I love you." Her mother did the same.

"Peeta," Evelyn stood next to the bed with tears in her eyes.

Peeta held onto Prim and her mother and said to them, "You both listen to me. Katniss needs us to be strong, so if you're going to cry, you do it tonight, because tomorrow our family becomes a family of Careers." He gave each of them a kiss on the cheek and Gale felt as though his heart were being ripped out of his chest. Not from jealousy, or anger, but pity.

"I love you, Peeta," Prim cried against his shoulder.

"I love you too, Prim." He turned his face and said, "I love you, mom."

"I love you too, Peeta," she said back to him.

Gale had to fight to hold back his own tears as he watched them say goodnight...goodbye to one another.

"All right," Peeta stepped back. "You two go home. Prim, you sleep with mom tonight." Both women nodded. "Now, I'm serious...if you two need to feel sorry, you do it all tonight. Katniss is going to need her whole family..." Peeta turned and looked at Gale. "...cousins included, to get through this, but she's coming home. She is leaving that arena alive."

"What about you, Peeta?" Prim had tears falling down her face. "Can't you both come home again?"

"Oh, Prim." Peeta tugged her braid. "I just don't think they'll let that happen. I think we all know that." Peeta let out a cleansing breath and said, "Okay...you two go on. I need to talk to Gale."

Gale waited until he was sure Katniss' family was gone and stepped towards Peeta. "Tell me what you need me to do and I'll do it."

Peeta gave Gale a teary stare and said, "You need to help us train for the Games."

"How?" Gale had no skills other than hunting and they weren't able to enter the woods anymore.

"You've got a gift with snares. Katniss was able to catch food that way last year, so if you could help us with that, I'd appreciate it."

Gale nodded. "Is there anything else I can do to help?"

Peeta sat on the end of his bed and turned to Katniss. He took her hand in his and placed a kiss against her fingers. Without turning he said, "I think you know what I need you to do, Gale."

Gale didn't have to ask. "I'll take care of her when she gets home."

Peeta lifted his eyes to him and said, "Thank you."

Gale looked around the room and took everything in. He wasn't standing in Peeta's house, but Katniss and Peeta's home. In his heart, he knew he'd never be able to replace what Peeta meant to Catnip. He placed a hand on Peeta's shoulder and said to him, "I told Katniss something like this once and now I'm going to say it to you. It doesn't matter how hard I try...I'll never be you, Peeta."

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The room was quiet, only the sound of a pencil's lead flying across a piece of paper could be heard amongst the group of rebels at the

Capitol. "That's it," Cinna announced. "What do you think?" He held up his sketchpad and showed it to the rest of the room.

"That's amazing, Cinna," Effie said breathlessly. "My word, the detail in that design is extraordinary."

"That's not mine," Cinna told her, "That's Peeta's handy work. I just borrowed it. Now all we have to do is get the uniforms made and send them out."

"How quickly can you have them made?" Plutarch asked.

"Portia and I will have to make several of them to last the three of them until they get to the Capitol...maybe two...three days," Cinna looked around the room.

"You're sure about this, Plutarch?" Carter sipped on a drink he brought in with him from the bar. "Snow is allowing the victors to train in preparation for the Games?"

"Not only is he allowing it, he wants me to promote it. The moment he found out what they were up to in Twelve, he insisted that all the victors be at the top of their Games. In his words, 'Tell me Plutarch, why crush their strongest when they're at their weakest.'" Plutarch had a look of disgust on his face. "He has no problem changing the rules to allow training prior to the Games, but he won't change the Quell."

Effie pursed her lips. "He created the rules for the Quell, why would he change them?" She stood up and paced around the room. "We all know the law for this year's Quell is just a little too convenient." She stopped walking and turned on her heels to face Carter. "What have you heard from the other districts about the uprisings? Any news?"

"Ever since the reading of the card, all of our contacts have said that the people in their districts have renewed interest in the rebellion. We're trying to get things situated now. District Seven should be ready to start an uprising in the next two weeks. District Four shortly after..."

Effie shook her head and said, "No. That won't work."

"An uprising won't work?" Carter asked with a hint of astonishment at Effie's comment, in his voice.

"Not the way it's currently being planned," Effie said. "I don't know where you all got the idea that they should begin fighting the moment they're able to..."

Plutarch interrupted her. "President Coin feels the sooner the fighting begins, the sooner we can win this war."

"No offense to your President Coin, but I haven't been impressed with anything you've told me about her thus far." After living under Snow's regime, Effie had no fear of speaking her mind about a president she'd never even met before.

*Shortly after returning from the Victory Tour, Effie, Cinna and Portia had met up with Plutarch and informed him about Peeta's idea to go into hiding in the woods of District Twelve. That's when Plutarch informed Effie about President Coin and the existence of District Thirteen.*

*"The rebellion had been planning on breaking Katniss and Peeta out of their district prior to the Quell and bringing them to Thirteen. Now that they're getting married and Snow has constant surveillance on them... District Twelve used to be a blip on the Capitol's radar." Plutarch said with disgust. "Now that tiny district has become what Snow fears most."*



*"No," Effie corrected Plutarch. "What he fears the most are our two victors."*

*"There's no way we'll be able to get them out of there unless they run into the woods with their families. We can get to them before the Capitol finds out. All we need to do is time it right," Cinna suggested. "If we can get a hovercraft like you had suggested, Plutarch."*

*"They are easy enough for the pilots to snatch and we do have plenty of Avox that know how to run such a high-tech piece of machinery. The codes they use to start them are simple enough to access."*

*Portia raised her brows and said, "I can't believe they don't protect those things better. Are they that cocky that they think no one would ever try to steal one?"*

*Effie pursed her lips and said, "Let's say we do get one...Katniss and Peeta...their loved ones are the first people the Capitol are going to send the Peacekeepers after. They'll catch them in those woods before that hovercraft will ever get there or they'll send another craft after ours. It's too risky. We need to take them from a place when they least expect it. Everyone will expect them to run into the woods, but no one would expect them to hide in the Capitol." Effie turned to them. "What if we brought them here...to this room. Their entire family will be here during the wedding. We could sneak them here, keep them in hiding for awhile. Cinna...Portia...you two are masters of disguise, we could easily pass them off as residents of the Capitol and walk them onto a waiting hovercraft. No one would be the wiser."*

*Plutarch let out a belly laugh and said, "We'd sneak them all out right under Snow's nose!"*

*"I think it would be wise to keep this under wraps," Portia suggested. "If we told them...or their families, they might start preparing for a*

*departure...saying goodbyes to their friends. We need them to simply disappear out of sight."*

*Everyone agreed with Portia's suggestion.*

*"In the meantime," Effie pursed her lips. "I want to know more about this woman Coin. Other than keeping District Thirteen going and attempting to run a rebellion from underground by using Katniss and Peeta, what is she like, because I refuse to hand my kids over to the female version of Snow."*

Effie got up and began her little pace. "No...if a rebellion is going to work then it needs to be planned out amongst all of the districts, not just a few of them here and there."

Cinna gave Effie an inquisitive look. "What are you thinking, Effie?"

"The uprising in Eight ended shortly after it began." Effie stopped walking and punctuated her words with her finger in the air. "Why? Because they were alone in their fight. The Capitol was able to send in Peacekeepers by the thousands to put a halt to Eight's attempt at freedom."

"Effie, Peacekeepers will be sent into every district when the fighting begins," Carter said. "This time, the plan is for the residents to continue fighting."

"And dying!" Effie turned to him. "Their makeshift weapons are no match for what the Capitol's guards have at their fingertips."

Plutarch crossed his arms and said, "We're all aware of what President Coin thinks we should do, but...what do you think we should do, Effie?"

She surprised all of them when she said, "Wait." Her fellow rebels began speaking over one another and Effie held up her hands and said, "Tut! Tut! Tut!" to silence them. "Hear me out." She paused. "If the residents of the districts gather for no good reason in the streets at any given then time the Capitol will get suspicious and send in Peacekeepers, but if there was a reason...like in Eight when Peeta proposed to Katniss. If the residents had to be on the streets...in the Town Square...perhaps to gather for a reaping..."

Plutarch's eyes lit up. "I think I see where you're going with this. Yes. Yes." He nodded. "This is good."

Effie clapped her hands together and said, "All of the districts gather within minutes of each other across the country so the Capitol audience can watch the reappings live. What if the moment those tribute trains pulled out of the station..." Effie lifted her hands in the air and said, "Picture this...the Peacekeepers are on guard in the districts, there are always extra ones assigned on Reaping Day, but their main concern will be the pool of victors from which the tributes will be reaped. Once the victors are tributes again and on the train, Peacekeepers tend to let their guard down because they're getting ready to head back to the Capitol. The people of the district begin to shuffle back to their homes, only this year, they don't go home. They stand up and fight. Instead of waiting for the Peacekeepers to be shipped into their districts with extra weapons, they are already there and the residents can get the jump on them. Take them down from the very start!" Effie's voice began to rise. "District by district can attack, and Plutarch," she pointed at him, "you know how to intercept the transmissions so the Capitol won't find out until it's too late! My word! We can do this!"

Everyone in the room began adding in their two cents.

Portia's voice was filled with excitement. "That would give the districts plenty of time to plan...recruit rebels."

"The Capitol won't know what hit them," Carter smiled.

"Effie, this is pure genius," Cinna gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"I told you this woman should be heading the rebellion!" Plutarch said of his old friend. "Effie, there's no way President Coin won't go for this. It's the smartest move to make. The Capitol might be able to stop one district from rebelling, but they can't stop nine of them at once."

"And the escape plan? How is that coming along? Anything on that front, Plutarch?" Effie asked...hoping that he had good news for her.

"No, I'm sorry. We still don't have the codes for the hovercrafts since they've been transferred to Snow's higher ups. I'm afraid you'll have to..." Plutarch, who had just been full of enthusiasm, was now showing signs of shame.

"What's going on?" Portia asked. "What will Effie have to do?"

"Not what. Who." Effie tugged on the hem of her shirt and said, "Viggo Bettes."

"Viggo Bettes?" Carter gave her a strange look. "He's third in command, Effie. How on earth are you going to get close enough to him to..."

Effie cut him off. "Viggo has had somewhat of a..." she licked her dry lips and told herself she could do this. "...let's just say he's been quite fond of me for several years and I plan on exploiting that. Flavius' cousin is throwing a dinner party tomorrow and thanks to his quick wit he has wrangled me an invitation. Viggo will be there and my goal is

to..." She flustered a bit then said, "Let's not forget...I am a woman after all and Viggo has made it abundantly clear over the years that he'd like to get to know me better. Tomorrow night, he shall get to know the Capitol born and bred Effie Trinket in all her glory. The woman that would be oh, so happy to have an official dangling off of her arm."

Cinna couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Effie, you cannot allow yourself to..."

Effie turned to him. "Cannot allow myself to be treated like the victors of the Games have been treated for so many years? Like an item that was purchased?" She could feel herself bristling. "We need to find a way to disable those codes or get a hold of one. Viggo has them and none of you have the capabilities to retrieve them. So yes, Cinna," her voice rose. "Yes, I can allow myself to be treated like the victors have been treated, to save their lives...to save the lives of the people of this nation."

Portia walked up to her with sadness in her eyes and said, "Effie, think about what you're saying. What if they find out that you're one of us?"

"They won't. Plutarch has assured me that the Capitol had quit questioning my loyalties towards them some time ago."

"She has been playing her role very well since the end of the Games," Plutarch added. "There are several Gamemakers that have wanted to bring her into the fold, so to speak, but I put a stop to that for now, claiming it would be too complicated during a Quell year."

Effie turned to them and told them what she had been dreading since she had made the decision to embed herself back into the Capitol life with verve. "There are things that I must do...say..." She thought of Peeta aligning himself with the Careers in the arena to save Katniss

and borrowed some of his courage. "Let's just say, Peeta isn't the only one that can play both sides of the game. I will no longer be helping the rebellion until I have achieved my goal. As of tomorrow night, I will no longer socialize with any of you. I will not come to this room nor will I help you in any way." She needed to tell them why. "It will be too risky. If for some reason I am followed...investigated... I cannot have anything to do with any of you outside of my job any longer. You may come to hate me due to my actions or the things you may overhear me saying. All I ask is that you remember who I really am and not who I'm pretending to be." Effie tried to hold onto her tough composure, but Portia's expression was too much for her to handle. "Please," she begged. "Understand. I must do something. I cannot sit idly by and watch." Effie lifted her fingers to her throat and said, "I would rather die myself than let President Snow kill my kids."

Portia placed her arms around the escort and said to her, "Effie, you are the bravest woman I've ever known."

Effie returned Portia's hug and said, "No my darling, that honor goes to Katniss." She stepped back and addressed Plutarch. "I promise you, I will do what I need to get you access to the hovercrafts, but you must swear to me that you'll take Katniss and Peeta to safety. That your President Coin will not allow them to perish in the arena."

"Effie, there is nothing she wants more than to get those two to safety." Plutarch held her hand in his. "Your genius will be missed around here, Effie."

She could no longer take the morose tone in the room. Effie smiled and said, "Well, of course it will. I am the brains of this operation, after all." She sat back down and said, "I do have one request. If you could keep this information to yourselves that would be of great help to me. The less that know what I'm about to do, the better. And now..." she

walked around the room and gave each of them a hug. "I must go. Cinna, would you walk me down the corridor?"

"Yes. Of course," he answered.

They took small steps towards the doorway that would change their relationship and quite possibly save the tributes that would be in the arena.

"Cinna, the training uniforms...you said that logo was Peeta's design?"

"Yes."

"You cannot let anyone know. They'll kill him the moment he steps off of that platform, if not before he enters the arena, for creating something so controversial. Snow will see it as a slap in the face." There was fear in Effie's voice.

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone outside of our room," Cinna patted at her hand.

Effie could hear her pleading tone as she said, "You'll create something for them...like their training suits? Something to protect them during the war? I know you can work wonders with your designs, Cinna. So I'll ask you now since I'm sure I won't have the opportunity to do so once we begin working together for the Games." Effie paused then gave Cinna a tight hug. "Make sure no one forgets our kids."

"Don't you worry, Effie." Cinna smiled. "Peeta's design has provided me with an enormous amount of inspiration." He pulled away from her and said into her eyes. "No one will ever forget Peeta and Katniss Mellark."

Three days later, Effie Trinket was sitting at the dinner table in the home of Capitol official, Viggo Bettes, drinking wine and laughing at his jokes. When he asked her what she thought about the Quell, she replied, "The Gamemakers that created the laws for the third Quarter Quell are to be applauded for their sheer brilliance. I think these are going to be the best Games ever!"

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Katniss didn't feel like a lecture, so when she woke up alone, she was grateful. She walked downstairs and saw a note on the kitchen table from Peeta informing her that he went to town. The scent of his breakfast lingered in the air and caused her stomach to churn. She raced to the bathroom and threw up whatever white liquor was left in her stomach. She had no clue how Haymitch could do this on a daily basis and she had no desire to find out. 'Yet another reason you need to sacrifice yourself for Peeta in the arena,' she thought to herself as she pulled her hair to the side and rinsed her mouth out. 'You're not built to be a drunk.' She showered, changed and walked to her house...her mother's house, intending on showing a brave face, but the moment she saw her family the tears hit her full force. She had to give her mother and Prim credit; they held theirs back and comforted her.

"I'll make you some broth," her mother said to her as she ran her hand over her hair.

"Sit up, Katniss," Prim gently ordered her. "I'll fix your hair for you."

Katniss sniffed and asked her mom to make Haymitch a cup of broth too. "I thought I'd bring it by and see how he's doing today."



"Of course," her mother's voice never faltered.

Katniss walked into Haymitch's house with cup in hand and sat next to him at his kitchen table. "Isn't this where I left you last night?" She slid the broth to him saying nothing more. They sat in silence sipping at the warm liquid allowing it to sooth them from the inside out, staring straight ahead at nothing whatsoever. Katniss heard the footsteps overhead and assumed it was Hazelle finishing up her daily cleaning. She was surprised to see Peeta stomping down the stairs.

"There. It's done," he put a cardboard box full of empty glass bottles on the kitchen table and gave Katniss a serious look. "Glad to see you decided to drag yourself out of bed this afternoon." Peeta knew he couldn't be nice about this. There would be no babying Katniss through the next couple of months. She needed to face facts and Peeta was planning on making her do so.

"What's done?" Katniss asked ignoring Peeta's dig at her.

"I poured all the liquor down the drain."

Haymitch snapped his head around and said, "You what?"

"You heard me." Peeta pointed at Haymitch and said, "Don't think you can buy more either because I've tracked down Ripper and paid her off. I told her if she sold to you...either one of you, I'd turn her in myself."

"Peeta!" Katniss couldn't believe he'd say such a thing to the woman he had reassured about her son when she was in the stocks.

"Don't Peeta me, Katniss." He stood directly in front of the two of them and said, "However this falls out, two of us are going to be in the arena again and one of us is going to be the mentor. We cannot afford

any drunkards on this team." Peeta gripped both sides of Katniss' chair and said, "Especially you, Katniss."

Katniss could see the anger flowing through him. "Last night was the first time I've ever been drunk."

"Yeah, and look at the shape you're in." He gave the chair a little slam against the floor. "Now you both listen to me." Peeta turned his head and glared at Haymitch. "Two of us will be returning from the Capitol this year. One mentor and one victor." He stood up and said with fierce determination. "Effie is sending me recordings of all of the living victors. We're going to watch their Games and learn everything we can about how they fight. We're going to put on weight and get strong. We're going to start acting like Careers. And one of us is going to be victor again whether you two like it or not! And you!" He pointed at Katniss. "It's time to face your problems and quit hiding from them! You leave here...you better drag your ass straight home to tell me where you're going! No more running away!" He left angrily out of Haymitch's house, slamming the door behind him.

"Looks like you're in trouble, sweetheart."

Katniss stared straight ahead and said, "Yeah. I hate it when he gets self righteous."

Haymitch picked up an empty glass bottle and tried to suck out the last dregs of alcohol. "What's to like?"

Katniss blew out a breath and stood up to leave. "He plans on you and me coming home."

"Well, the jokes on him." Haymitch started sucking at another bottle.

She walked into their house only a minute after Peeta who immediately turned on her, "I am not kidding, Katniss. Things are going to change around here."

Katniss felt like her head was going to explode and she didn't feel like a fight. "Sorry I left last night, but I told you I needed some time to myself and I didn't run away. I just..."

"Disappeared," Peeta stood looming over her. "Well, that's enough!" He knew this would be hard, but it had to be, the Games weren't going to be easy on her...after the Games things would be worse and he had to prepare her for it. "I'm going to your mom's. We're making a meal plan to help bulk us up."

Katniss let out a snort, "A meal plan? Are you kidding me?" She had expected him to hug her, kiss her...take her in his arms and sooth her worried soul, but creating a menu with her mother was the furthest thing from her mind.

"No, I'm not kidding!" Peeta stormed to the front door. "We're a family of Careers now, Katniss and Careers..." he gave her the once over, "...don't give in to their weaknesses. Like alcohol."

"Careers," Katniss mumbled.

"That's right!" Peeta threw the front door open and said, "Get used to it!"

Haymitch and Katniss agreed to do as Peeta asked and trained for the Games. They began spending their days going on runs, Haymitch getting winded within the first twenty or so yards. Their nights were spent watching videos of former victors and their fighting styles, to which Haymitch volunteered information about their personalities. They went to bed the same way every night, Haymitch leaving for his

house after they watched the last of the day's recordings, Katniss saying she was tired and asking Peeta to join her in bed and Peeta saying he'd be right up only to fall asleep on the sofa in front of yet another recording. They lifted weights, practiced their combat skills and were surprised when a few days after they began their preparations for the Games they were visited by Peacekeepers. They were all sure they were going to tell them they had to stop training for the Games; instead they were told all victors were required to watch television that night for a special announcement about the Quell.

Katniss sat on the sofa in front of the television waiting for the program to start. "I wonder what it's going to be now."

"Don't know, sweetheart. This is a first for me," Haymitch sat in a chair with his arms resting on his legs. Peeta sat in the chair opposite him in a matching pose.

They didn't have to wait long before the Capitol's seal appeared on the screen, their nation's anthem played and President Snow himself walked up to a waiting crowd. "Thank you." He waved. "Thank you." He placed his hands on the side of a podium and said, "Citizens of our great nation, none of us could have predicted what our forefathers had planned for the third Quarter Quell."

"You mean what you had planned," Katniss sneered.

"And I know it has come as a shock to all of us to see our beloved victors having to face the arena once again. This is why I have passed a new law..."

Peeta sat upright. "Think he's going to change the rules for the Quell?"

"Don't know," Haymitch shrugged.

The president continued, "I am allowing our mightiest to become even mightier. From this day, all victors are encouraged to train for the third Quarter Quell within their districts."

The three of them exchanged looks. "Great," Haymitch murmured. "A whole arena full of Careers."

The president went on to talk about how important the Games were and how the rebels needed to be reminded of their past actions, but the trio blanked most of what he said out until they heard that camera crews would be stopping in each district to film the victors as they prepare for the Games.

Three days later, they received the last delivery they'd ever get from their friends at the Capitol. Training uniforms. Katniss' had a fiery mockingjay emblem above her left breast, Peeta's a fiery jabberjay. Haymitch's had the same design that covered the back of all of their uniforms, a mockingjay and a jabberjay in flight, their wings entwined, their heads held up to the sky, encircled by a ring of fire.

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Effie Trinket had two weeks left before Reaping Day which meant she had three weeks until Katniss and Peeta were in the arena again. She had discovered several things since the start of her romance with the repulsive Viggo Bettes, an older man with dark blue hair, a handlebar mustache of the same hue and a fondness for Effie's wigs. The Capitol had questioned some of Effie's comments about Katniss and Peeta during their Games, but believed she was a true patriot from her actions afterwards. She took her job as escort seriously, but always had something good to say about their president and their country. They were upset with Cinna and Portia about their recent uniform

designs, which Effie had been expecting. It was bad enough that Katniss' mockingjay was once more in front of the cameras, taunting Snow with her defiance. The addition of Peeta's jabberjay was like pouring salt into Snow's wounds. The purpose of this Quell was to reinforce the Capitol strength not highlight their spectacular failures. Effie had also learned that the Capitol had no clue that Plutarch Heavensbee wasn't as loyal as he appeared to be, that the hovercraft codes were constantly changing and even the pilots didn't know what they were until right before they boarded, but most of all that Viggo had a secret room in his cellar. Nothing like Plutarch's secret room. This one was hiding important information like the computer system that held the ever changing hovercraft codes. If the coding system was disabled, the hovercrafts could start by a simple push of three buttons, but no one outside of the President and his officials knew where they were generated from. No one but Effie Trinket. She ran her hand up her throat and began applying a light dusting of powder against her skin as she thought of the previous night's events.

*"Effie, darling," Viggo called to her from his study. "Will you be staying this evening?"*

*She hated staying at his house. She hated being in his company, still she answered, "Of course, my dear. Try and stop me." Effie ran her hands up his arms and placed a kiss against his cheek feeling his repulsive mustache tickle her face. It always took all of her reserves not to swat it away as though it were nothing more than an insect. "Shall I change or will you be working for awhile yet?"*

*"I won't be long," he gave her a pat on her rump and Effie wanted to twist his hand until it snapped off at the wrist. "Go on up...and Effie, dear...leave the wig on."*

*"Of course," she flashed him a brilliant smile and headed upstairs. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath trying to search for a source of strength to make it through yet another night with him. As she was about to enter his bedroom she saw him leave his study and head down to his cellar, a place Effie had never seen him go before. She quickly slipped off her shoes and followed in his footsteps. There were racks and racks of wine bottles, both at room temperature and in a chilled, glass room. Effie had hoped that Viggo would be hiding some secret documents or something of the sort. Instead he was simply getting them a bottle of wine. Her back hugged the wall when she saw him not pulling a bottle out, but pushing one in. Effie watched as the wall of wine slid three feet to the side and a room appeared behind it, she could make out a few blinking lights, but that was it. She quickly rushed up the stairs and stripped herself until she wore nothing but a slip and her wig. When Viggo entered the room twenty minutes later with a bottle of wine, Effie's mind was racing. She had to get into that room and find out what was in there. She poured them each a glass of the red liquid, only taking sips of hers and continued to fill Viggo's glass. She offered to get another bottle and asked him where he kept them.*

*"In the cellar, but I'll go," Viggo headed out for another bottle.*

*Effie rushed into the restroom and poured her glass of wine down the drain. She didn't care how many bottles it would take, she was going to get Viggo Bettes as wasted as Haymitch on Reaping Day!*

*'If this war is a success,' Effie vowed to herself. 'I will never wear a wig again.' She pulled at the gold colored puff sitting atop of her head. She would be taking a huge risk going to the rebel's secret hideout, but she had finally achieved her goal. Effie knew how to disable the computers that provided the encrypted codes to launch the hovercrafts. She had decided she'd go to Tigris' shop and act as*

*though she were purchasing things. In her purse was a tiny music box she planned on leaving in the hideout, that played the song, Beautiful Dreamer and a music chip she'd use to record a message for her rebel friends once inside of the room.*

*When she entered Tigris' shop the older woman gave her a curious look, "Can I help you?"*

*Effie glanced around the place making sure it was devoid of any customers and said, "No, but I think I can finally help the others."*

*Tigris smiled, gave Effie a wink and said, "We never doubted you for a minute."*

*Effie let out a little breath as she entered the secret room. The tables were gone, but for one, the floor seemed dirtier to her, the lighting dimmer. There were sketches on the wall of Katniss' and Peeta's wedding attire. Her pearl dress and his black tuxedo. Next to it were swatches of fabric. Effie ran her fingers along two of them and thought, 'why would they need to sew these, they're already made,' but the texture of the material beneath her fingertips was nothing a typical piece of clothing would be made out of. She smiled to herself thinking, 'I knew you would make them remarkable Cinna.' She placed her tiny music box on a shelf next to some medical supplies and whispered, "Take care my darling ones." Then began recording the information into her little music chip in regards to Viggo Bettes hidden room behind his wine cellar.*

*"My friends, It has been too long. I have accomplished my mission and so much more. Plutarch, you will be pleased to know that you are safe from suspicion, however...Cinna...Portia, the Capitol has been watching you two like a hawk and I fear for your safety my dear, dear friends." There was a pause as Effie composed herself. "At this point in time, they are questioning every district and their slower production;*



however they have no ideas about a possible uprising. Now for the essential part of my message, the computer room..." Effie went on to describe how to enter Viggo's home, what codes to use, which bottle of wine to push to enter the secret room and one more thing. "I have decided not to pull myself out at this time. Once his room is destroyed, and it must be destroyed, the Capitol will question who was behind it. I have a plan to pin this on Viggo himself. In order for it to work, I must continue my rouse. I shall see you all soon." She stopped for a moment and said something that she knew had to be said. "This nation has been suffering long enough. It is our responsibility as citizens...no, as human beings to speak up for those that have been kept silent. My friends, I do not know if I will make it out of this alive, but I in no way regret my choice to stand beside you and fight for what I believe in. Katniss and Peeta have led by example, showing this nation...showing me...that you can do anything...accomplish anything if you only believe in what you are fighting for. Well, I do believe! I believe in the rebellion! I believe in a nation that sees all of their residents as equals! And I believe in Katniss and Peeta and what they are about to do!" She pictured Peeta throwing hundred pound sacks of flour in front of his parent's bakery like they were nothing more than a feather in his emblematic jabberjay's wing. Katniss hurling knives into the bark of a tree as the mockingjay circled by a ring of fire on her training uniform, shown for the entire nation to see, while the camera crews were in District Twelve. A feeling of pride swelled through Effie. She gave her fist a little pump in the air and her voice cracked as she choked out, "Our fiery little birds shall fly us all to freedom!"

Two weeks later it took every ounce of reserve she had as she fished around a giant glass bowl for Katniss' name on a sheet of paper. Her heart was shredding apart when she read out the name, "Haymitch Abernathy" and Peeta volunteered for him. Though her mouth said, "Happy Hunger Games and may the odds be ever in your favor!" Her

heart screamed, 'Don't you worry my darling ones...my fiery little birds, we'll save you and then you'll save us all!'

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Gale leaned over Peeta as he showed him how to tie the last of a series of knots for a snare. "How's the hand doing?" he asked.

"Better. I think all this snare stuff has been a big help. Not to mention the braiding you suggested with my other fingers. Training them to do what my index and middle fingers normally do...pretty smart. Now when my first two fingers give out, the second two automatically take over." Peeta lifted his hand and gave his fingers a little jerk then went back to work on his snare.

"And what about you two?" Gale motioned with his chin towards Katniss who was working about twenty feet away. "How are you two doing?" Gale had noticed some tension between the two of them as of late.

Peeta answered. "Fine."

Gale gave him a little laugh and said, "Bull." He glanced at Katniss then back at Peeta. "A couple of months ago, she was passed out drunk, lying in bed and you and I were having a conversation. At that time I thought, nothing is ever going to come between these two. Now she's right there...wide awake and you could drive a delivery truck between the two of you so start spilling."

Peeta stopped working on his snare and gave his head a little shake. "Are you asking as my friend or as my competition?"

Gale furrowed his brow and said, "I think we both know you don't have any competition."

Peeta didn't think it would ever be possible, but Gale had just admitted in a round about way, that he thought of him as a friend. Peeta had to admit, it had been awhile since he had talked to someone of the same sex, close to his age about...anything. Peeta gave Katniss a quick peek then went back to work on his snare. "I thought it would be easier on her if she got used to us not being so..." He really had no clue how to explain it to Gale without divulging too much intimate details. "...so close."

"So you've been keeping her at arms length?" Gale asked.

"Pretty much." Peeta answered. He hadn't expected the sound of Gale's laughter, but it was right there piercing his ear. "What's so funny?"

"You two are the dumbest smart people I've ever known," Gale smacked Peeta on the back.

They both noticed Katniss looking at them but ignored her stares.

"Peeta," Gale said quietly. "You've got two and a half weeks left with her. Two and a half weeks before one or both of you are reaped and then a week before you're thrown back into the arena. By my calculations you've got less than a month to live the rest of your lives together." Gale straightened up and gave Peeta the best piece of advice he could. "You can either throw away that time or live life to the fullest." Gale stood up and Peeta stared into his eyes. "Don't know about you, but I know what I would do if I only had a few weeks left with the woman I loved...hell, I'm doing it." He smiled as he walked towards Katniss.

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Katniss was sick of all of the training. She sat on the ground, and listened as Gale laughed while Peeta worked on his snare. 'Gale's probably laughing at your lame attempts at tying twine,' she thought to herself. She didn't want to be angry with Peeta, but she was furious with him. The man hadn't touched her...hadn't given her more than a friendly kiss against her forehead since the reading of the card. 'I got more action when I was single,' she blew the hair out of her eyes. 'Maybe that's why his mother's such a cranky witch? Maybe the Mellark men get married and never touch their brides again?' She glared at Peeta from where she was sitting. She ran the back of her hand across her forehead to brush her hair away from her eyes. It needed to be trimmed, but she didn't bother with it. Her prep team would have their way with her when she got to the Capitol. "Ha!" Katniss let out a little laugh thinking, 'At least someone will have their way with me.' When she felt Gale's hand on her shoulder she jumped. "Hey."

"Hey," Gale smiled at her. "How about you and me spend a little time together? Wanna walk me home?"

Katniss gave Peeta a look, she was so tempted to just leave with Gale and not say a word to him, instead she went up to Peeta and said, "I'm going to walk Gale home. He said he wanted to spend a little time alone with me, okay?" She waited for her old Peeta to come out. The one that got jealous of Gale's love for her. Instead she got the Career trainer she'd been living with for the past couple of months.

Peeta looked up at the sky and said, "Don't take too long. Looks like rain and I don't need you hurting your foot again."

Katniss crossed her arms over her chest and walked past Gale. "Let's go!" She ordered him.

"Whoa. What's wrong with you?" Gale asked after they got out of the village.

"My husband's an ass." Katniss answered without even thinking about what she said.

"I'm sorry, you're what?" Gale arched a brow. "Your husband?"

"Husband...fiancé...whatever," Katniss covered. "He's an ass."

Gale lifted the corner of his mouth in a boyish grin and said, "He's worried about you, that's all."

"Well, he's got a funny way of showing it." Katniss stopped walking and had herself a little tantrum. She stomped her feet, shook her fists and clenched her teeth. "He's treating me like...like...PRIM! Like he doesn't even want to touch me!"

"Maybe you should say something to him," Gale suggested.

Katniss threw her head back and said, "Yeah, like I haven't tried that. Every time I try to talk to him about it, he blows me off. 'Oh, I'm tired, Katniss. I'm busy, Katniss. We've got to wake up early, Katniss.' Do you have any clue what it's like to live with a man that doesn't even sleep with you? Well, I'll tell you." She was pacing in a little circle. "It's very frustrating. More than frustrating. Oh, he'll come upstairs to bed if I have a nightmare, but that's about it. Otherwise he's watching footage of the victors in training or old recordings of their Games. Even when the cameramen were here filming us in training he didn't touch me...nothing!" Katniss stopped her pacing. "All I want is to feel loved again." She laughed a little. "Kind of funny, isn't it? Me the one

wanting love?" She lifted her sad eyes to Gale and said, "But I miss him. I miss him so much and I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, Gale."

Gale put his hands on her shoulders and said, "Catnip, I think you're talking to the wrong person here."

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"I think Peeta's the one you should be telling this to, not me."

The first crack of lightning split the sky followed up by a clap of thunder. "Gale, I need to head home."

The rain was just starting to fall down as Katniss entered Victor's Village. She opened their front door and shook herself off. She told herself she would try just one more time and if Peeta brushed her off then she would spend the rest of her time in District Twelve at home with her mother and Prim.

"Gale get home okay?" He asked as he stared at the television set.

"Don't know. I left him about halfway there. It started to rain," Katniss walked slowly towards him. "Peeta?"

"Yeah," his attention was focused on a victor from District Two.

"I miss you." He didn't say a thing so Katniss decided to move a little closer to him. "I miss you, Peeta." She saw him lift his eyes to her and then turn them back to the TV.

"I don't know what you want me to say Katniss. I'm right here." He had been thinking about what Gale had said, but allowing himself to give into Katniss would be weak. He had no choice but to stick to his guns.

Katniss was sick of the sound of their television set. She stood directly in front of it and said, "Shut this off, Peeta."

"I will after I'm done watching..."

She threw her hands up in the air and said, "That's it. I tried. I refuse to beg...I've been begging for months...pleading, but I won't anymore. You want to sit on your ass and watch television, go ahead. You want to sleep on the sofa all alone at night, go ahead. I'm going home. I'm going to be around people that actually want to be with me." She walked out of their house and into the pouring rain.

"Huh?" Peeta was trying to figure out what she had said. 'She was home.' He looked out the door and thought, 'Oh, her other home. Oh, hell no!' He may not have been willing to succumb to his wants and desires, but he couldn't bare the thought of her not being around him all the time. Just knowing she was in the next room brought him comfort. "Katniss!" His feet splashed through the puddles that were quickly forming in their street. He spun her around by the arm to face him. "You're not going anywhere."

The rain was cool against their skin, causing their already tight training uniforms to cling to their damp flesh. Peeta's hair began to darken and droplets of water hung at the ends of his curls. Katniss' braid grew heavy with the weight of the water that was falling from the sky.

"I can go wherever the hell I want! And I'm not wanted there!" She pointed to their home.

"Yes you are, Katniss!" He couldn't tell what were tears and what was rain on her face, but he knew from the sound of her voice that she was crying.

"Then why, Peeta? Why do you keep turning me away from you?" The sound of thunder crashed through the air.

He wondered for the briefest of moments if this is what she felt like when she was contemplating their wedding proposal. The amount of guilt was overwhelming. He could see the pain and anguish in her eyes, highlighted by the lightning and it made him want to cry for being the cause of it. "Katniss, you have to understand what I'm trying to do here." He gripped her arms. "We're in training." It was a lame excuse, but all he could come up with.

"Yes, we're Careers. I get that, but what the hell does that have to do with you and me, Peeta?" She was desperate to know. "Does being a Career mean we can't be husband and wife?"

"Yes!" He had to tell her. "It means you don't give into your weaknesses and you are, Katniss. You are my weakness and I'm yours!"

She shook her head frantically and screamed, "No Peeta! You're my strength! You are my strength!"

Katniss words pierced his heart like one of her arrows. She was nothing without him and he nothing without her. His arm reached out and pulled her to him. Their mouths met in a wild, wet fury of battling tongues and mashing lips. Katniss jumped up and wrapped her legs around his waist and Peeta took hold of her body with one arm and one hand underneath her bottom, carrying her back into their house.

They didn't say a word. They didn't have to. They found strength within each other's arms and spent the rest of their training days behind closed doors. Sharing meals with their family, Haymitch included, and on Reaping Day they took the stage with their friend, Effie, standing between them.



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"Ladies first," Effie's usual flair was forced this year. Katniss could hear her fingernails scratching at the sides of the glass bowl she was fishing around inside of it to get to her name. When she finally caught the piece of paper Effie read out, "Katniss Everdeen!"

'Mellark!' Katniss thought to herself. Everyone knew it would be her, there was no surprise, but the crowd of people standing in the square appeared to be stunned at the sound of her name being called out. Her friends and family were standing closest to the stage behind the miniscule roped off areas designated for the victors to stand in prior to Effie's calling out their names. The pain in her mother and Prim's eyes was worse this year than last, because this year they might lose not only a daughter and a sister, but a son and brother as well.

"And now for the boys," Effie's Capitol accent seemed to be as prominent as ever. Katniss stared straight ahead as her escort dug through the bowl silently wishing, 'Please call Peeta again, Effie. Call, Peeta.'

"Haymitch Abernath..."

"I volunteer," Peeta didn't even let Effie finish speaking their mentor's name before stepping forward to take his place.

Katniss swallowed the bile that rose to her throat. Her eyes flashed to Peeta's family. His brothers were wiping at their eyes. His father simply allowed his tears to flow freely and Peeta's mother pressed her lips tightly together, averting her eyes from the stage. She looked upset. Katniss remembered the morning she had waited until Peeta was out of sight before his mother finally admitted out loud that she

had loved Peeta. She hoped that the woman would finally say that to him during their goodbyes this year.

She turned her focus towards her family as Effie called for applause from the crowd. Katniss had expected something like this to happen prior to their departure, but the source of the crowd's heartfelt gesture was completely unexpected.

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"Ladies first," Effie called out to the crowd.

'Why not just say, Katniss first?' Haymitch thought to himself. 'What a crock of shit.' He stood next to Peeta in a little roped off area feeling like a pig getting ready for slaughter. He stood there waiting...debating...he honestly didn't know what he was going to do if Peeta's name was called. He told himself he'd volunteer, 'but would the kid be safe if he went into the arena with Katniss? Who's to say the Capitol wouldn't try to kill them anyway?' In the span of seconds he went round and round in his head and then a sweet voice, one he hadn't heard in twenty-five years spoke to him, *"You know what you have to do, Mitchy,"* Maysee's nick name for him. 'You gotta step up to the plate, old man and let these kids have the life you and Maysee should've had.' Haymitch lifted his chin up higher...he was ready to step forward as a volunteer to save his kids. He watched Effie's fingers slipping around the glass bowl, trying to latch onto one of the two pieces of paper. 'Don't let me down, Trinkie. Call the kid.'

"Haymitch Abernath..."

"I volunteer," Peeta's voice cut through Haymitch like a knife.

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"Ladies first." Peeta missed Effie terribly and knew how hard it was for her having to stand on the stage and pull their names out of the bowl. She had confessed to him that she almost quit her escort position, but Haymitch told her about the rebellion and she decided to stay on. Peeta knew in the deepest part of his heart, that Effie Trinket stayed on as their escort not for the rebellion's sake, but for he and Katniss'. She loved them and would do anything to protect them. He watched her as she finally latched onto the slip of paper with Katniss' name on it and thought, 'It's okay, Effie. I still love you.'

"Katniss Everdeen."

'Mellark.' Peeta mentally corrected Effie after she called out Katniss' name. When Effie stuck her hand in the bowl holding his and Haymitch's name, Peeta silently willed his escort not to do what she had done the year before. 'Don't call out Peeta Mellark.' Thankfully it wasn't his name pulled out that year, but his mentor's. If Peeta had been called, it would be just like Haymitch to volunteer and then Peeta would be screwed.

"Haymitch Abernath..." Effie's voice rang out.

"I volunteer!" Peeta stepped forward before Effie had even finished reading out the name.

Peeta looked out to the crowd, the entire district was there. All of their friends and family. His eyes met them each one by one, Sae, Ripper, Delly, Madge...the list went on and on. He looked at his new family and felt a sense of comfort knowing that they too would be taken care of along with Katniss. He made sure of that the morning after the

reading of the card. He looked at his own family and saw his mother's expression. 'Bye...witch.' He had decided to cut all ties with her when he overheard her saying how upset she'd be if he died in the arena and she lost out on all the money he'd been giving them. He looked at his brothers and wished them luck. 'Get out of the bakery...out from under mom's thumb. Find love. Be happy.' His dad, 'Thank you, dad. I know what you're going to do for me...for Katniss' family and I know why. You are braver than I ever gave you credit for. I love you.' Peeta finally let his eyes rest on Gale and said a silent thank you. 'Take care of my wife, Gale. You might not be me, but you don't have to be. She'll need you to relight her fire when she comes out of that arena alone. I'm counting on you. I know we've had our problems and once you find out the truth about me and Katniss you may not want to take care of her, but I need you to, Gale. I need you to have my back like you used to have Katniss' in the woods.'

Effie stood back and said, "Let's give them a big round of applause, shall we?"

The silence was deafening. Peeta couldn't fathom what he was seeing. Gale, he knew now for certain, would always have his back.

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"Ladies first," it was hard for Gale to hate Effie Trinket, especially since she had risked so much to smuggle them medications from the Capitol, but she was the one that would be calling out Catnip's name any second now and for that reason alone, Gale despised the Capitol born woman.

"Katniss Everdeen!" Gale wished Effie didn't have to sound so damn happy about it.

"Now for the boys." Effie stuck her hand in the giant glass bowl. 'The boys?' Gale thought to himself. 'They don't look like boys to me.' He glanced at Peeta and Haymitch and wondered for a moment if Peeta would actually volunteer for Haymitch if his name got called. 'Why would he? It would be a perfect scenario if Haymitch went in instead of Peeta. Katniss could win and then Peeta could be with her. Yeah, but then Haymitch would be dead,' Gale thought to himself. 'Think Peeta could live with that for the rest of his life?'

"Haymitch Abernath..."

"I volunteer," Peeta didn't hesitate.

Gale blew out a breath and thought, 'There you go again. Always doing the right thing.' Gale clenched his teeth as he saw Peeta's eyes scanning the crowd. Gale gave a quick look to his left...to his right noticing all of the lives Peeta had touched standing around him. People that Gale thought were his friends for years, turned out to be merely acquaintances, but they were truly Peeta's friends. He had never seen Greasy Sae cry before or Ripper, but they were standing there with tear streaked faces. Gale could hear his mother's gasps for air to his side, saw Prim and Katniss' mom clutching onto one another for dear life. It was as if everyone in their district knew, Peeta Mellark wasn't coming home alive. He was going into the Games to send Katniss back to their district as a victor once again. 'No, Peeta,' Gale thought. 'I could live the rest of my life and never be you. I don't think there will ever be anyone quite like you.'

Gale heard Effie say, "Let's give them a big round of applause, shall we?"

The crowd was silent. No one was going to applaud the death of Peeta Mellark. Gale took a step forward and pressed his three middle

fingers to his lips. As he held them up in front of Peeta he thought, 'I'd take a whip for you, Peeta.'

Katniss' breath caught in her chest as she witnessed the act playing out before her. Her best friend, the man that had been jealous of Peeta...that had been vying for her affections and begged her to stay away from Peeta, had just given him the ultimate sign of respect.

Peeta's chest swelled with pride as he watched Gale step forward and lift his three middle fingers to his lips then hold them up directly in front of him. Peeta's father followed...his brother...Katniss' family...all of his friends...then it spread throughout the district. Thousands of eyes held Peeta's as they said their goodbyes.

Haymitch had learned the meaning of the three fingered symbol as a young child. You didn't grow up in District Twelve back then without experiencing death on a weekly basis, but today the symbol wasn't simply being used to say farewell to a loved one. The people of his district were saying thank you to Peeta Mellark.

It took a great amount of reserve for Effie not to kiss her fingers and lift them with the crowd of District Twelve. Instead she knew she had a role to play and this would be one of her greatest challenges. "Let's shake hands."

Katniss and Peeta held hands and placed a soft kiss on the other's lips.

"I love you," he mouthed.

"I love you," she mouthed back.

They were ushered off of the stage and greeted by the smiling Head Peacekeeper. "New procedure," Thread said and made them leave

out the back door of the Justice Building and into a waiting car with Effie and Haymitch so they could go to the train. There would be no cameras that year. No crowds wishing them good luck. Most importantly, there would be no goodbyes to their friends and families.

In Districts Three through Eleven banners of the fiery jabberjay/mockingjay symbol flew threw the air and the voices of the rebellion called out, "Freedom's in flight!" The uprisings had begun!

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter**

### **15: Trains, a hunger**

### **games fanfic |**

## **FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Fourteen: Trains**

**Well, our favorite pair will be going to the Quarter Quell, the rebellion has started unbeknownst to the citizens of D12 and**

**Effie Trinket is still deep under cover. In this chapter you find out the name of Peeta's father, please note all the names I come up with have a purpose or meaning to me, and Peeta asks his dad to do something for him, but what is it? Y'all know I'm going to make you wait to find out, right? We're also introduced to two very important characters.**

**Thank you to A and S for their beta skills and being so awesome!**

**Thank you to all of you who read, review and continue to follow this story with such dedication. I am flattered. Do not forget to check out [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com/](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com/) And to those of you who are currently following the CF: Outtakes, there is another chapter almost ready for posting. Now it's time to catch up with...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Cinna and Portia tested the costume prototypes out, in the rebel's hideout, over and over again. "It works, Cinna," Portia said with an exasperated sigh.

"We need to make absolutely sure," Cinna was determined to try it just one more time.

Portia placed her hand on his and said, "At some point we're just going to have to trust ourselves. If we don't get to work on the full sized garments they'll never be ready in time."

"I'm being anal, aren't I?" Cinna asked with an uncomfortable grin.

"Cinna," Portia reassured her friend of many years, "if you weren't this...anal, we'd never have set Katniss and Peeta on fire in the first place."



Cinna leaned back in his chair and crossed his feet in front of him. "I wish I could call them. I'd give anything to hear their voices."

Since Cinna had sent in their training uniforms, they had been informed that all deliveries to District Twelve would be stopped immediately. Though the Capitol never said they were also cutting out communications via telephone as well, whenever anyone tried to call Katniss, Peeta or Haymitch all they heard was a clicking noise on their phone line. Effie was still able to make and receive phone calls to them, but no one knew if she ever did. The only person that had spent any semblance of time with Effie Trinket was Plutarch and that was always at a Capitol function with very high ranking officials. Cinna and Portia had seen her twice. Once to measure her for a gold wig and the second time to make sure it fit. When Effie asked why she needed a new wig, Cinna told her it was so they could all look like a team for the Games. The truth was, Cinna and Portia simply wanted to see her and make sure she was all right.

Portia began rubbing small circles in the center of Cinna's neck. "We have no way of letting Katniss and Peeta know we'll be getting them out of that arena Cinna. With the heightened security, even the rooftop garden isn't as safe as it used to be. They've got cameras up there now."

"I wish Effie were here." Cinna rolled his head towards Portia.

He and Portia began thinking about their friend who was risking so much by staying so close to the Capitol officials and the night they found her recording.

*"Our fiery little birds shall fly us all to freedom!" Cinna, Portia, Carter and Plutarch could hear Effie's tears as the recording on the little music chip she left for them ended.*

*"That's it," Carter said as he palmed the chip. "I found it here when I came in earlier." He lifted his forlorn eyes towards his comrades. "That woman has truly outdone herself."*

*Portia wiped away at her tears and said, "Katniss and Peeta would be proud."*

*"Haymitch would be furious," Cinna walked over to the wall that held his and Portia's sketches for the Quell. "He'd have never let her put herself in this much danger."*

*Plutarch walked behind Cinna and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Haymitch is a smart man. He knows that we're all putting our lives at stake for this rebellion. He may be upset with Effie's choices, but he'd respect them."*

*Portia repeated Effie's words as she walked towards Peeta's sketch of his and Katniss' tokens. "Fiery little birds." She turned to the room. "That's what they are to her...little birds and she considers herself their adopted mother when they're away from home."*

*Cinna gave Portia a soft smile and took her into a hug. "Funny considering how many people are counting on them to...what did she say? Fly us to freedom?" Cinna felt Portia stiffening in his arms. "Are you all right, dear?"*

*"Fly us to freedom." Portia smiled and said, "Plutarch where's the sample banner you have for the rebellion?"*

*"I have it," Carter stood up and walked towards a shelf and then pulled out an 8x10" piece of paper with Katniss and Peeta's faces in profile, staring at one another against a black background with Peeta's design burning between them.*

*"Fly us free," Portia murmured as she looked down at the picture.  
"No...no I don't like that one."*

*"What are you doing, Portia?" Plutarch asked.*

*"Thinking of something..." Portia turned to Carter. "You're a sponsor. The whole purpose is bragging rights, correct? You put out money for the tributes you think will win and if they do, everyone in the Capitol knows about...uses your establishments... In the end you're making money."*

*Carter nodded. "This is true, but if I pick a losing tribute...which I normally do..."*

*Plutarch gave his friend an encouraging look. "All of us here know you do that intentionally, Carter. There's nothing wrong with wanting to help out those less fortunate in the Games."*

*"Still..." Portia gave Cinna a little smile. "When we sell something, do we just hope and pray that someone will tell people where they got their magnificent garments or do we brand them?"*

*Cinna could read Portia's mind like a book. "We brand them." He looked at Carter. "Advertising is key to any successful business, is it not?"*

*Everyone in the room realized what Portia's idea was.*

*"How about, the rebellion lives on?" Suggested Carter.*

*"No," Cinna gave Portia's hand a little pat. "Effie had it right. Our little birds are flying us to freedom."*

*"Freedom takes flight..." Portia stopped and said, "NO!" She faced them all and felt the power of Effie Trinket as though she were standing right next to her. "Freedom's in flight!"*

Cinna blew out a small breath and said, "Effie would figure out what to do about getting word to Katniss and Peeta about the rescue."

Portia let out a tiny laugh. "Yes she would." Portia could picture it in her head. "She'd get up and do that little pace of hers..."

"Talk to herself," Cinna added with a smile.

"Yes," Portia's tinkle of a laugh ended on a sigh. "Can't you just see her, Cinna?"

He began picturing the Capitol escort with her little hat bobbing up and down on her wig. "Too bad Katniss isn't here. She does quite the passable Effie Trinket impression. Maybe we could've channeled Effie through her."

Portia gave him a smile and a playful tap. "Here, I'll try." She cleared her throat and mustered up an Effie voice, "Manners, Katniss!"

Cinna started laughing and said, "Not bad. Now all you have to do is the little walk and her genius rambling."

Portia's smile faded as she admitted. "I'm worried about her. I know Plutarch says she's doing great...everyone is in love with her, but I'm so worried, Cinna. This plan of hers could get her killed."

"Don't be, Portia. Effie knows how to handle herself." Cinna could see his friend's concern. He could practically feel her worrying from where he sat. "You know what?" Cinna stood up. "I'm going to do Effie's little walk and talk for you. It'll cheer you up." He gave her an impish grin.

Portia sat back wishing with all her might that Effie Trinket would walk into their room and catch Cinna at that very moment. "Go ahead," she smiled at the thought.

"Hmmm..." he wasn't sure how to start. "Okay..." He began pacing. "We need to get a message to Katniss and Peeta...how did we do this in the past?"

"You're horrible at this," Portia thought, they must be extremely exhausted if they were playing such silly games.

"I'm just getting started," Cinna cleared his throat again. "Where was I?"

"How did we get messages to them in the past...Effie." Portia held up her hand and said, "Cinna, that's it."

"What's it?" He asked.

Portia stood up, grabbed her sketchpad and a pencil. "He can read the messages Cinna. Peeta knows all the codes."

Cinna sat back down and said, "We already thought of that, Portia. It's too dangerous to try and send him something in code here at the Capitol."

"Who said we're going to *send* it to him?" Portia began sketching out her idea for Cinna's approval.

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The number of victors that stood waiting for the reaping in District Four gave Finnick Odair hope that he would be safe. Granted they didn't

have as many as Districts One or Two, but they had more than the rest. Regardless of whether or not Annie's name was called, Finnick knew that Mags would be volunteering to take her place. The thought of losing Mags in the arena was painful, but not as painful as losing his Annie. He held his breath as their escort announced, "Ladies first." He didn't even want to hear Annie's name called. She wouldn't even be able to handle the idea of going back into the Games. Finnick had told Annie over and over again that she wasn't going in, but she still worried about it...cried herself to sleep at night. Finnick had spent the majority of his nights since the reading of the card soothing Annie after her horrible nightmares, trying to coax her back to sleep. "Annie Cresta." Though Finnick stood perfectly still, with his hands held behind his back, his heart wept as did his Annie.

"I vulneer," Mags, an eighty year old victor of the Games stepped forward and took Annie's spot in the Quell. Mags' words came out in a jumbled mess, but her message was loud and clear.

'Thank you, Mags,' Finnick said silently to himself. Now all he needed was for one of his other victor's to get called, but the odds weren't in his favor.

"Finnick Odair," the escort from District Four called out.

For some strange reason, Finnick had a feeling his and Annie's names were chosen on purpose. What were the chances that he and the woman he loved would be picked out of all the victors in their district? 'Probably as good a chance that Peeta and Katniss would be in the arena together,' he thought to himself. 'Well, Finnick, you've got a part to play. Let's get to it.' He clapped his hands together and stepped up to his escort. When she told him to shake hands with Mags, he picked up his former mentor and smacked her on the lips. Since Annie was the only living female victor of District Four she

would be going with them to the Capitol. They walked off stage with Finnick's male mentor a younger man named, Skipper Coontz. Finnick wasn't sure what the kid was going to do for him considering Finnick had mentored the kid only two years prior, but he trusted him and knew that Skip would watch out for Annie while he was at the Capitol. Fortunately, Skipper wasn't very attractive and he wasn't on very many Capitol resident wish lists. No, that spot was still saved for Finnick.

"Let's go. New procedures." Their Head Peacekeeper rushed them into a car that led them to the train.

"What do you make of that, Mags?" Finnick asked. "No cameras? No goodbyes?" None of them had anyone they needed to say goodbye to anyway. Everyone they loved was on the tribute train headed for the Capitol. Mags just gave him a shrug and headed straight for the food. "Want to eat something, Annie?" Finnick asked her.

She was wiping at her eyes and sniffing. "No."

Finnick could see the renewed panic in her eyes the moment they stepped onto the tribute train, but he had to ignore it and she knew it. "Well, I'm going to have myself some of these little cakes." Annie loved tea cakes. Finnick walked over to the table and said, "Mmmm," he picked one up with his fingers and popped it into his mouth. "This is good," he said with his mouth full hoping to coax her out of her tormented state.

"Finnick," Julia, his escort said with a flirtatious hint in her voice. "You really should be using a plate and fork."

"Oh, Julia," he picked up another little cake and popped it into his mouth. "Why would I need a fork when my fingers work just as well?" He licked at them slowly and watched as his escort fluttered her lashes. The moment she turned her back, Finnick rolled his eyes and

made a face towards Annie who graced him with a little smile. "Boy, these sure are good." He turned to Annie. "Sure you don't want one? I'm probably going to eat them all."

"You better not," she walked up to the tray full of treats and placed a few on a plate for her own consumption.

Finnick breathed a sigh of relief. His Annie was back...for the time being.

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Katniss stood at the window of the train and watched as District Twelve...home, faded into the distance. 'Prim,' she thought. 'They didn't let me say goodbye to you Prim.'

"We'll write letters, Katniss." Peeta's heart broke for her as well as himself when they were ushered away from the Justice Building without the opportunity to bid farewell to their loved ones. "It will be better anyway. Give them a piece of us to hold on to. Haymitch will deliver them for us if...they need to be delivered." In the back of his mind he was thinking, 'I've already said my goodbyes to everyone but you Katniss so don't worry. This is only temporary. You'll see them again and when you do it'll be better than goodbye...it'll be hello.'

Katniss turned into his arms wanting to let her sadness consume her, but there were no tears, only heartache. She was horrible with words and she knew it. The only person she could ever really speak to without tripping over her tongue was holding her in his arms. She wished for a moment that she had Peeta's gift for words so she could write letters to her friends and family. She'd tell them everything they had ever meant to her, but it was useless. "I'm going to my room."



Peeta followed her without her asking and sat at the edge of her bed. He watched her as she curled into a little ball, hugging her knees to her chest then wrapped himself around her. "Tell me, Katniss. Tell me what you would've told them."

She stared out the window at the blur of imagery flying by. "What's the point?"

He tucked a few loose strands of her hair behind her ear and said, "After I took my place next to you on stage, I said my goodbyes to everyone in my head. I looked at them and...in my mind I told them what I knew I'd never say to their faces." Peeta rested his cheek against her hair. "It sounds stupid, but it helps knowing that I got it out...maybe not verbally, but...I admitted these things to myself and it helped me, Katniss." He ran his hands up and down her arms. "Try it."

She lay there in a tight ball for a few minutes until finally she said, "I'd tell Madge thank you." Katniss rolled onto her back and squeezed her pin. "She was my friend through everything and people don't have a lot of those in their lives, do they?"

Peeta shook his head from side to side. "No, they don't." He stroked her cheek and gazed down into her sad eyes.

"I'd say thank you to your dad too," she lifted her hand to his face and held it there. "For the cookies he gave to me last year...I never thanked him for those and for always being kind to me and Prim. And Peeta..." she blinked rapidly, knowing he wouldn't understand why she was about to say what she was going to say. "I'd thank your mother too."

"What for?" This came as a complete surprise to him.

"For you. If it wasn't for the two of them...I'd never have you."

It amazed Peeta how much he loved this woman. "Oh, Katniss," he said on a sigh as he placed a kiss against her forehead.

Katniss placed her hand against her chest and said, "Then I'd tell my mom how sorry I was for wasting so much time resenting her. I could've been a better daughter...could've been there when she needed me, but I didn't understand, Peeta. I had no idea that a person could practically die from heartache. I'd tell her that I love her and that I'm proud of everything she's done to help the people of our district...of how she raised Prim." Katniss threaded her fingers through Peeta's and said, "Then I'd tell her it was okay if she fell in love again. If she found someone else, because I know my dad would want that for her." She really hoped Peeta understood that she wanted that for him too.

Peeta was so happy to hear her say those words; he just hoped she'd follow her own advice and allow herself to love Gale. "Maybe one day she will. I hope she does. No one should spend their entire life in mourning."

Katniss thought for a moment and then said, "I'd apologize to Gale for not telling him about us right away...for hurting him. I'd tell him that I was glad he was back in my life and that I was...am so proud of what he did today." She could see her friend standing in the square holding up his fingers and directing it towards Peeta. She knew everyone assumed he'd be the one to lay down his life in the arena, but they were all mistaken.

"That was something," Peeta cleared his throat at the memory of Gale's actions. "He...he's a good friend to you."

Katniss lifted her eyes to Peeta and said, "To us." She let her gaze drift downward when she thought of the last person in District Twelve she'd say goodbye to. It was too heart wrenching to even fathom.

Peeta saw her eyes filling with tears and he asked, "What would you tell Prim?"

Katniss sniffed, trying desperately to hold back the sobs that were threatening to come out. "That she's the best sister anyone could've ever hoped to have. That she's stronger than I could ever be and that...that I was wrong." Katniss took a deep breath. "I was so wrong." She squeezed Peeta's hand and told him, "I'd tell her to find someone to love her the way that I love you and when she does...never let him go. Marry him...have a life with him...live all of her days as though they were her last and never...not for one moment...let anyone tell her how to live her life." She wrapped her arms around his neck and let the tears she had been holding back cleanse her.

Peeta held onto her quaking body allowing her the time she needed. He thought of his dad again...thought about the morning after the reading of the card and his visit with his father.

*Peeta had stepped out of his house, leaving a note on the table for Katniss before going into town so she wouldn't worry. 'Maybe you'll get the hint, Katniss,' he thought to himself as he placed the paper in the center of the table. 'You don't just take off without telling your loved ones where you're going.'*

*The moment his feet touched the ground he began jogging. Career training was in session. His prosthetic was no longer a problem for him, as a matter of fact; it was stronger than his own leg. Sometimes Peeta wondered if the Capitol messed with the functionality of it on purpose, but it didn't matter since he knew how to handle his new appendage now. As he passed the homes in Victor's Village he took notice of the house with the broken window. 'Guess I know how Katniss cut her hand,' he thought to himself. Right next to it was the empty house that the Capitol's surveillance no longer worked in. Peeta*

*kept his eyes straight ahead keeping up the steady pace, taking in as many sights as he could and filing them away in a mental memory bank. The people of the district that had been ignoring him only yesterday were now lifting a hand to him in greeting followed up with a look of remorse, but Peeta didn't let it get to him. He simply lifted his chin, as though he were saying hello, and continued on his run.*

*He walked into the back of his parent's bakery and overheard his mother in the front of the store talking to a customer.*

*"I can only hope they call that waste of a drunkard instead of Peeta," his mother said. "I'd hate to think of my boy dying in that arena." Peeta heard the familiar sound of the cash register. Before he could even muster up some form of semblance of hope that his mother actually cared about his well being he heard her say, "Losing all that money he gives to us each month...I don't know how we'd survive."*

*It should've come as a surprise to him, she was his mother after all, but it didn't. His mother's first love was money. Her second was blaming people for her lack of money.*

*"Peeta," his dad came down the stairs with a jacket on. "I...I was just on my way to see..."*

*There was a familiar feeling when Peeta ran into his father's embrace. He was instantly brought back to the Justice Building after his reaping. "Dad," Peeta swore he wasn't going to cry, but the feeling of his father's arms around him had him reverting back to a five year old child again.*

*They could hear the bell on the front door of the store ringing, signaling the entrance of more customers. "Come on," his dad said as he guided him out the back way. "Let's go before you mother sees us."*

*Peeta and his father walked back towards his home in Victor's Village. There was so much to be said and so little time to say it in. Peeta fished around in his front pocket, dug out a key and placed it in the palm of his dad's hand. "I need you to hide this," he whispered. "Not in anyone's house either. If they find it..." Peeta gave his father a look that said, 'I'm endangering your life.'*

*"You can count on me, Peeta." His dad squeezed the key into the palm of his hand and said, "Where we going?"*

*"Someplace safe to talk," Peeta whispered as he held his face downward in case a camera was picking up his image.*

*"Katniss!" Peeta called out before he even closed the front door of their house. He knew she was probably still passed out from the alcohol she had consumed the night before. "Give me a second." He checked to make sure she was still in bed. Not only was she still there she hadn't moved a muscle since he put her in bed. He then returned to his father's side. "Want some tea?"*

*Peeta's dad opened his hand and looked at the key he was holding. "Can you tell me about this now?"*

*"Yeah." Peeta pulled out a chair for his dad and took a seat across from him. "I can't go into too much detail...all I can tell you are that the Capitol likes to keep an eye out on their victors as well as their families. I think you're all safe because...let's face it...mom hates me as much as President Snow does."*

*"She doesn't hate you, Peeta." His father tried to explain. "She just doesn't know how to say it."*

*"Or show it," Peeta added. He recognized the sign immediately. His father was making up excuses just like Peeta used to do, but he*

wanted to show his father that there was a way out, that they were more than what his mother made them believe they were. "Doesn't matter anymore, dad. I don't need her. I spent my whole life trying to get her to love me and the whole time..." Peeta let his eyes wander then land on his father's. "...the whole time I was trying to get my mother to love me, I didn't notice the father that adored me...that was going through the same thing as me. Now, I'm not going to ask you if she's hit you dad, because it doesn't matter. I know what her words can do and they can hurt just as badly as a wooden spoon if not more. You see...bruises fade. Words can last a lifetime." Peeta gripped his dad's hands in his. "Don't let her hurt you anymore, pop. Don't let her do it."

His dad had tears in his eyes as he said, "I should've been stronger for you. Should've helped you..."

"Then help me now." Peeta knew it would take a lot for his father to do what he was asking. "Dad I need you more now than I ever did as a kid."

"I'll do anything for you, Peeta," his father turned his hand over and gripped Peeta's. "What can I do to help you?"

Peeta let his head drop. He swallowed the lump in his throat then said, "Take care of my family. My girls. They'll need someone after I'm gone and I can't let them go through what they did after Katniss' dad died." Peeta looked at his dad and said, "I mean...I know I don't mean as much to them as her father ever did, but...I couldn't love them any more than if they were my own, dad."

"No, Peeta. You're wrong." His father dug his fingers into Peeta's hand. "You know what Evelyn told me the other day when I walked her home? She told me...I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost that boy. It would be like losing one of my own children. So don't you think you

*don't mean as much to those women as they do to you." Peeta's father held up the key. "Is that what this is for? So I can take care of them?"*

*"Yes. You can only use that in a dire emergency though or else..." Peeta couldn't say anything more without giving away too much information about the rebellion.*

*"How will I know if I have to use it?" His dad asked.*

*"You'll know, dad. Trust me...you'll know. In the meantime. Do you think you can help me arrange some stuff with the local merchants? Me, Katniss and Haymitch...we're going to start training for the Games."*

*"Isn't that against the rules?"*

*Peeta sat back in his chair. "What are they going to do pop, ban us from the Games?"*

*His father blew out a breath and said, "You're going back in even if Haymitch is called, aren't you?"*

*"I am and she's coming out...and dad...when she does...I expect you to be here for her."*

*"Peeta, this whole district will be here for her. You can count on it." They stood up and took each other in an embrace. "Now why don't you tell me about this key?"*

*"I can't tell you, dad. I have to show you." Peeta gave him a little grin. "Ever sneak out of the house at night, dad?"*

*Peeta's father had kept his word. He not only talked to the other merchants about allowing Katniss, Haymitch and Peeta to help unload*

*their heavy deliveries, choice products were put to the side for them to help with their preparations for the Games. Once the new law was put in place allowing the victors to train, Peeta's father had even talked to some of the people that used to sell goods at the Hob and gotten them to clear out the bakery's pig pen. It was now the new training center for the victors of District Twelve. Peeta's mother had a fit, but his father had finally stood up to her and told her if she didn't like it she could pack her bags and get the hell out. The Justice Building performed divorces as well as marriages. When they cut back on their training Peeta's father would show up for family dinners five nights a week joining Katniss' family and Haymitch, but Peeta's mother refused to come and he feared that his brothers were her newest targets since they never showed up either. He begged them to come, but they always turned him down and Peeta saw the telltale signs of fear in their eyes, the one he and his father used to have. He tried to talk to them about it, but neither one of them would listen. The night before the reaping, Peeta walked his dad home. They stopped halfway between the bakery and Victor's Village.*

*"You'll check on them?" Peeta quietly asked as he looked between his feet.*

*"Every night," his father assured him.*

*"What are you going to tell mom?"*

*"To go to hell," Peeta's father pulled him into a hug and said, "I love you, Peeta. Always have. Always will."*

*"Love you too, dad."*

*"Peeta? Peeta?"*



He shook away thoughts of home at the sound of Katniss saying his name. "Yeah," he looked down at her. "You okay?"

"Yes," she brushed her thumb against his cheek. "Are you?"

His face was drenched with tears.

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'What a crock of shit!' Johanna Mason, the only living female victor of District Seven, stood in the Town Square during the reading of the Treaty of the Treason thinking to herself, 'That little bitch just couldn't let him die during her Games and now I've got to go back into the arena? Hell, they should've killed her and kept the boy around. I like him better anyway. He's a hell of a lot better to look at than that sniveling little bitch. She's lucky they need her alive or she'd be dead within seconds of that friggin' gong ringing out. And who does she think she's fooling with her lovesick female bullshit? I'm most definitely not falling for it. Oh, sure...she can say whatever the hell she wants for the cameras...Haymitch might even fall for the girl's line of shit, but I know better. She wanted to stay alive and she was willing to do anything in the arena to save her ass. Well, if little Miss. Fireball thinks I'm falling for that she's just as crazy as Annie. And that woman's a freaking fruitcake. I swear to God, if Katniss even looks like she wants to kill me in that arena...I'm not hesitating to slaughter her scrawny little ass.' Johanna thought about Katniss and Peeta's sleeping bag scene in the cave. 'You're kind of a little prude aren't you? Hiding under that bag just so you can kiss him. Okay...so you might...MIGHT...have feelings for him or you could've been trying to get your rocks off that still doesn't excuse the fact that I'm going back into the arena! Son of a bitch! Friggin' Snow! God, I'd kill him myself if they'd let me walk around the Capitol with an axe. Wonder if I could

poison him? Poison is easy enough to hide.' She lifted an eyebrow. 'Hmmm...wonder if they sell that nightlock shit on the shelves in the Capitol now that everything Katniss and Peeta touched in the arena has turned to freaking gold? Those stupid Capitol residents are probably making pies out of them.' Johanna almost laughed at the thought until she heard her name being called out.

"Shit," she murmured as she walked up to her escort who was glaring at her reaction to being reaped. "What? Did you expect me to jump for joy?"

There were three male tributes to choose from in District Seven. One would have to go into the arena, one would mentor at the Capitol and the other would stay home and fight alongside of the rebels. Johanna couldn't give a shit who filled what role. She didn't even know who was going into the arena with her until she walked up to a fellow victor on the train a few hours later and said, "Hey. You going in with me or what?"

Blight gave her a somewhat curious stare and said, "Yeah."

Johanna nodded her head and made her way to the dinner table full of food. "What?" She turned around and feigned disappointment. "No lamb stew!" She let out a loud laugh as she loaded up a plate, kicked off her shoes and threw her legs over the arm of the sofa while she ate her dinner. 'Might as well enjoy this while you can, Johanna.'

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Peeta had noticed Effie acting a lot more like the woman he had met at his last reaping. She barely asked about him and Katniss, then again, he had hardly heard from any of their rebel friends at the

Capitol since the reading of the card. The clinking of their dinner plates seemed to echo through the train car causing an uncomfortable silence. It was driving Peeta insane. "I love your new hair, Effie." He hated the gold wig, but it was a lot better than the orange one.

"Thank you," She patted at the puffy golden ball that sat atop her head, loathing it the entire time. "Cinna insisted that I have it done for the Games to match Katniss' token. He thought we could each get something to make us look like a team," she pursed her lips. Effie knew her words were being overheard by Capitol officials and that she was putting Cinna on the spot, but the man had made her promise to divert all queries away from herself and Portia and direct them towards him.

"I already have something," Peeta patted at his chest, where his locket sat underneath his shirt.

"Well," Effie flapped her hand and went back to her dinner. "Maybe we could get Haymitch a gold bracelet or something."

Peeta gave Katniss a wink, hoping to bring on a smile and said, "I think that's a great idea. How about it, Haymitch? Want a gold trinket?"

This was the first year that Effie could remember Haymitch not drinking on the tribute train. He had directed the Capitol staff to dump all of the hard liquor immediately after boarding the train. Effie could see how hard this was for him. He still had no clue that the escape plan had been put into motion. As far as Haymitch was concerned, either Katniss or Peeta had to walk out of the Games as a victor, the other would die and it was his job as mentor to help them kill off his friends. She wished she could take him to the last train car, open up the windows and spill her guts. The fact was she needed to, but the compartment had been locked up tight as a drum and a Peacekeeper was posted in front of the door until they arrived at the Capitol to make

sure no one snuck into the last car. The reason the Capitol gave was that tributes might try to jump out of the moving train, but Effie wasn't a tribute so the only logical explanation was that the Capitol wanted to hear everything everyone had to say. Effie refused wine with her dinner telling the attendant to pour the bottles of wine down the drain. She could no longer stomach the beverage without thinking of Viggo's pesky blue moustache against her skin. What Effie really needed was a stiff drink. 'Like Haymitch's whiskey,' she thought to herself.

"Maybe we should get you a gold wig, Haymitch?" Katniss gave him a little smile. Effie knew it was an attempt to lighten her mentor's spirit, but he just glared at the child.

"Shall we watch a recap of the reapings?" Effie asked.

Peeta was more than grateful when his escort put an end to, quite possibly, the most uncomfortable meal they've ever shared, and they had eaten at President Snow's mansion, so that was saying something. "Let me get my notebook." Peeta knew Katniss hated his notebook...hated anything that had to do with watching the old victors, but she had come to accept it since he had finally stopped acting like her drill sergeant and more like her husband again.

He was pleased when he heard her say, "Grab an extra pad and pencil for me, will you?"

"Sure." He didn't think she'd write anything down, in fact he knew she wouldn't, but it was her way of letting him know she was okay with him going back into Career training mode as long as he didn't cross the line and forget about her again.

As Effie watched the recap of the reapings she did her best to hold her personal comments to herself with the exceptions of a few that escaped her without thinking. Anyone listening would've been fine with

the majority of her little statements as they were all generalizations, but the sight of three children small clinging to their mother's legs when she was reaped broke Effie's heart. "Oh, no. Not Cecilia." Effie's fingers instantly flew to her lips in regret. She had to think of something to say to cover for her heartfelt statement. Cecilia's husband had passed away only last year and she had no other family so Effie said; "Now the government will have to foot the bill for raising those three children if and when she dies in the arena. I suppose that's why each district has a home for orphans." She could feel the stares she was getting from Katniss, Peeta and especially Haymitch. His was the worst. When the reapings were through Effie watched as Haymitch excused himself and went to bed, glaring at her the entire time. She followed shortly after.

Katniss scooted closer to Peeta and whispered into his ear, "Have you noticed something strange about the way Effie's been acting?"

One of the Capitol attendants entered the room so Peeta quickly stifled Katniss with a kiss. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the woman clearing away the remainder of their dinner plates. A sad expression plagued her features when she saw them kissing on the sofa. She set the plates down on the table and left Katniss and Peeta alone.

"What was that for?" Katniss was giving Peeta a look that said, 'who was that show for?'

Peeta trailed a few kisses across her cheek and let his lips linger at her ear. "I don't think it's safe to talk anywhere on this train right now. Too many people walking around." He kissed her neck and said, "You look tired, Katniss. Why don't you go to sleep? I'll come in shortly."

"This again?" Katniss said flatly.

"I mean it. I want to go over my notes, and then I'll come in." He placed a kiss against her lips for himself this time. "I promise."

Katniss stretched and said, "Peeta...don't stay out here too long. I really don't know if I can sleep without you."

"I won't." Peeta would've gone to bed with her, but he was bothered by Effie's behavior as well and wanted to talk to the woman, plus there was something he needed from her before he went into the arena.

Effie heard the knock on her door; she was expecting it, just not so soon and not Peeta. "Did you need something? Are your quarters not to your satisfaction?"

Peeta had no clue who this woman was standing before him. "I wanted to talk to you about the victors that were reaped. Got a minute?"

She stood at the entrance of her room contemplating whether or not she should let him in. If she did she ran the risk of it getting back to the Capitol, if she didn't she wouldn't be playing her role as escort very well. She held her door open and told Peeta, "I'm quite tired. It's been a big ,big, big day. If you wouldn't mind keeping it brief."

"Sure," Peeta gave her a questioning gaze. "This is my list of victors that were reaped," he handed her his notebook. "I've taken notes on their fighting styles...Haymitch has given us information on their personalities, but anything you can offer would be a big help." He handed her a pen and said, "If you see something I got wrong, cross it off."

Effie quickly scanned through his notes, her eyes stopped when she saw the words beautiful dreamer. 'The music box,' Effie thought. 'I hid a message in the music box.' She lifted her eyes to Peeta's and said,

"Why don't you leave these with me and I'll look them over?" Effie knew Peeta had hidden a message for her in his notes.

"Sure." Peeta was hoping she'd say that. Hoping with all his might that she'd take the time to really look at what he wrote down. "See you in the morning, Effie." He walked out of her room and down the hall to take a quick peek at the victor from District Two's recording.

Effie turned the notepad facedown on her nightstand, removed her clothes and changed into her nightgown. She stared into the mirror thinking to herself, 'I hate this damn wig. I hate these false eyelashes. I wish I could simply parade around like Katniss...only she's naturally beautiful.' Effie sighed as she ripped the gold monstrosity off of her head. She removed her makeup and left her lashes on, then took her hair out of the tight bun she kept it in underneath her wig. She brushed out her blond hair which barely skimmed her shoulders. She sat on the bed and picked up Peeta's notepad. It was an old code from before the Dark Days. One that was used right before the enemy's eyes and they never knew it. Effie read every tenth word of Peeta's note, knowing she had to memorize the words, writing it down would be like signing her own death warrant. When she was done with it she smiled. She opened up the bottom drawer of her nightstand, pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses then waited for her second visitor of the night to show up. It took Haymitch twenty more minutes before he finally tapped at her door. She walked to it, opened it up, sighed at him and said, "Well, come in. I didn't let them toss all the whiskey off of the train."

"How ya doing, Trinkie?" Haymitch closed the door behind him.

She pursed her lips and said, "Don't call me that you vile little man." Effie made a gesture with her chin towards the whiskey and waited as

Haymitch brought her a glass. "I swear...if you get drunk Haymitch, I shall throw you off of this moving train myself."

"Don't worry. I just need something to take the edge off." He sat on the edge of her bed. "Don't think sponsors are gonna be a problem this year."

"No, probably not," Effie stood her ground and sipped at her drink, finding comfort in the warmth of the alcohol as it made its way down her throat.

"You probably won't have a lot to do...Katniss and Peeta can pretty much sell themselves to the sponsors," Haymitch rested his elbows on his knees as he took a few sips of whiskey.

"Then I shall enjoy the festivities like all the rest of the Capitol residents. After all...I am one of them, you know." She had used the words he threw at her as an insult, during last year's Games, at him in a vague attempt to let him know she was simply playing her role to the best of her abilities. When she saw his eyes light up and the corner of his mouth lift in a sly grin. Relief washed through her.

"Effie, I've always known you were one of them." He stood up and poured her another glass of whiskey without her asking. "Probably why we don't get along too well."

"My...do you think?" She said sarcastically. Her friend knew...he had always known...never doubted her and now it was time to have a little fun for the Capitol's sake. "It's either that or the fact that you're a drunken buffoon with the manners of a barbarian."

"Or maybe it's because you've got your corset tied up so tight you don't know the meaning of the words loosen up?" He sneered at her.



'Oh, Haymitch,' she thought to herself. 'How I've missed you.' "I'm surprised you even know what a corset is considering the women you probably associate with."

Haymitch let out a burst of air through his nose and said, "At least I associate with people from the opposite sex!"

Effie hated what she was about to tell him and how she was going to do it, but she had no choice. "Well, you'll be pleased to know Haymitch, I have been...associating with someone for quite sometime now and it's...very serious."

The look of shock that crossed Haymitch's face would've stunned a nation. "You mean...you've actually broken down and decided to buy yourself a man, Effie?" He started to laugh.

Effie bristled like she was expected to and yelled, "Viggo is not purchased..."

"Viggo? Viggo!" Haymitch smacked his thigh and let out a snort of laughter.

"Yes! Viggo Bettes! He's a very important figure at the Capitol, you know?" Effie tightened up the belt on her robe. "So...so...you better watch how you speak to me from here on out Haymitch Abernathy!" She downed her drink and poured another. "Now...get out!"

Haymitch couldn't stop laughing. He snatched the bottle of whiskey and it took everything Effie had inside of her not to snatch it back when he walked out of her room. Effie knew Haymitch was about to drown his sorrows...all of them. Not just the loss of his friends in the arena, but the loss of her if she got caught while playing her own game for the rebellion.

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Prim went to answer the knock at their front door, but was stopped by her mother. "I'll get it. I don't want you opening up that door anymore. From now on, I'll answer it."

Evelyn looked through the tiny hole to see who was on the other side. She opened the door with a confused expression splayed across her face. "Bing? What are you doing here?"

Prim stood several feet behind her mother and greeted Peeta's father. "Hi Mr. Mellark." Her heart broke when she looked at him. She imagined Peeta would be his spitting image when he got older...but he wouldn't get older.

"Hello, Primrose. Evelyn." He held out a small box. "I have a delivery for you."

Evelyn opened up the door and said, "Come in." She took the box from his hand and placed it on the table.

"Who's the delivery from, Mr. Mellark?" Prim asked as she looked at the plain white box.

The mirror image of Peeta's smile beamed down at her as he said, "Open it up and see."

Prim glanced at her mom, silently asking for permission and getting approval with the nod of her mother's head. She pulled on the tiny string that was tied in a bow and lifted the lid. Prim and her mother hugged each other tightly when they saw three cheese buns, done to perfection, sitting inside.

"He wanted me to make sure you were taken care of," Peeta's father's eyes met Evelyn's.

Evelyn's teeth began to chatter and her eyes filled with tears. "Join us for some tea? The reapings will be on soon. Perhaps you'd like to stay and watch?"

"I would. Thank you." Bing Mellark walked into their kitchen and said, "If you tell me where everything is, I'd be happy to make the tea for us."

Prim sniffled and said, "I'll show you."

They worked in unison, brewing cups of mint tea before sitting down in the living room in front of the television to watch the reapings. Prim almost smiled when she noticed that Peeta's father took his tea the same way Peeta did. He even sat the same way Peeta did, with his elbows propped against his knees as though he were listening intently to what everyone had to say.

When the television showed the reaping for District Twelve, Prim grabbed her mother's hand. Though she knew how it would turn out, she still wished Effie Trinket would've called out a different name. If it were up to Prim, she'd volunteer for Katniss so she'd never have to see the inside of an arena again. She'd volunteer for Peeta too if she could. Instead Prim sat and watched as her sister took her place next to Effie Trinket. The look of shock she had on her face the year before was replaced this year with a mixture of strength and sorrow. Then Effie called out Haymitch's name and Prim felt the same overwhelming sensation of loss she had earlier that day when Peeta volunteered for him. They cut out the part where Effie suggested everyone in the district applaud for Katniss and Peeta and skipped directly to her telling them to shake hands. Prim had tried to behave the way Peeta told her. She tried to be like a Career, but watching them tell each

other "I love you" in what she had come to know as their private language, was too much for her thirteen year old heart to take. "Mom," she turned to her mother's waiting arms and cried with her. Prim could swear she heard Peeta's voice...the one he used on Katniss the day Gale was whipped.

"Everything is going to be fine," Peeta's father said softly as he stood in front of them. "They're going to do what they need to do to bring Katniss home to you and Peeta..." he cleared his throat, "...Peeta will always be here with you. He'll never leave any of you." Prim lifted her eyes to the baker and felt her bottom lip trembling. She wondered how he could stay so calm knowing that his son was going to die. Then he bent down and tugged on the end of her braid. "This is a family of Careers...we're strong and they may be on their way to the Capitol, but that doesn't mean we can show our weaknesses. They need our strength and support now more than ever."

Evelyn wiped her eyes and said, "That's right." She held Prim by the upper arms and said, "Careers don't cry."

"No," Prim followed her mother's lead and wiped her eyes. "They don't." She saw the untouched baked goods sitting on a serving plate and said, "They eat cheese buns."

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Haymitch sat in dark corner of a train car with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. Katniss had walked right by him and didn't even notice him, but he noticed her. He could tell just from looking at her that she had woken up from a nightmare. 'The gift of the Games,' Haymitch thought to himself as he sipped at the whiskey in his glass. 'They just keep on giving your whole life long.' He got up and followed

her, thinking maybe he should check on her, but stopped short when he got to the doorway for the next car. He watched as Peeta asked her, "You want to talk about it?" The kid knew what nightmares were too, though sometimes Haymitch swore he never let on.

Katniss said, "No."

Peeta held his arms open to her and Katniss walked right into them. Haymitch told himself to leave. 'Give the kids some privacy for Christ sake.' Yet he couldn't rip his eyes away from the pair. Katniss' arms were gripping at Peeta's while he buried his face in her hair and placed kisses in the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I should've gone to bed with you." The girl didn't say a word. She just closed her eyes and held onto the boy.

Haymitch wondered how he was going to do this...choose between them. He had made a promise to both of them...swore to each of them he'd get the other out alive, but the truth was he had no clue who he was going to help. They had both made good arguments...great ones actually about why they should die in the arena, 'but how do you choose,' Haymitch asked himself, 'when they both deserve to live? Hell, they all deserve to live. So what are you going to do?' His head was saying one thing...his heart another. Unfortunately he didn't know which one to listen to so he listened to Katniss and Peeta instead.

"What's with him?" Katniss asked looking at a closed door. Haymitch wondered who the "him" was she was asking about.

"I think he feels bad for us," said Peeta.

Katniss began pouring some milk and let out a sarcastic, "Right."

"I mean it." Peeta rubbed the small of her back. "I don't think the people in the Capitol are going to be all that happy about our going back in...or the other victors. They get attached to their champions."

Katniss handed Peeta some milk then poured some for herself and said, "I'm guessing they'll get over it once the blood starts flowing."

"Katniss..." Peeta began rubbing her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

"Don't, Peeta." She turned to him. "Don't think I'm going to feel bad for these people. I don't give a shit about them and they don't give a shit about us." She looked to the side and sipped at her milk. "So...you're watching some tapes?"

"Not really," he stepped closer to her and kissed her temple. "Sort of skipping around to see people's fighting techniques."

"Who's next?" Katniss rested her head against Peeta's chin.

"Let's go to bed," he suggested.

"I can't," she looked into his eyes. "Not yet." She waited a few seconds before asking again, "Who's next?"

"You pick."

When Katniss pulled out Haymitch's Quarter Quell he turned and made to leave the compartment before a voice stopped him...her voice. *"It's time to face it, Mitchy."* Haymitch hadn't seen his Games since the night of his crowning. Oh, there had been footage of him on television, shots of his final fight, but the scene in which he won the Games had been edited for the viewing audience and Haymitch never watched the footage. If it was on while he was at the Capitol, he'd get drunk and ignore it. If he was in the District Twelve suite during the

Games, he'd shut the television off then Effie would turn it back on when the footage was over. She always knew when it was safe to put it back on. She always knew everything.

Haymitch didn't pay attention to the beginning of the recording Katniss and Peeta were watching. The sound of President Snow's voice never fazed him. It wasn't until he heard the words, "Ladies first," that he was transported back in time.

*Haymitch wasn't nervous for himself; he'd be fine if he went into the Games. He'd win. He'd come home, be a victor and then he could marry Maysilee. Her family wouldn't stand in their way if he were a victor. In the darkest recesses of his mind he almost wished for his name to be called out so he could come back home and give her everything she deserved. He listened as the first name was called out. Haymitch knew the girl from the Seam and thought, 'She's dead.'* Then his nightmare came true. "Maysilee Donner!" The breath caught in his throat as he turned to see his Maysee hugging her sister and her best friend, Evelyn. Haymitch watched as she made her way up to the stage wondering what to do. 'What can you do?' He asked himself. 'She's going in. You can go in too...make sure she gets out alive. Yeah and then you die. So you die. Can you do that? Can you die for her?' He looked at her as she stood on the stage, her long blond hair catching in the slight breeze, her ivory skin; her bright blue eyes and then he saw a ray of sunshine reflecting off of her dress...no...it was her pin. His grandma's pin. 'Yeah,' Haymitch said to himself. 'I'd die for her.' The boys were called one by one and Haymitch's chances to volunteer were dwindling. He asked himself what he was waiting for. Told himself that he'd step up for the last guy, but thoughts of his family...his mother...his sister...what would they do without him? He was the one that did all the trading at the Hob that brought home food for them to eat. He was the one that did the odd jobs around town to earn money to provide for his family since he was the only man left.

*"Haymitch Abernathy!" The first thought that popped into Haymitch's mind was, 'Be careful what you wish for.'*

*He and Maysilee barely said two words to each other on the tribute train. They said even less during training, but Haymitch would never forget the night before the Games. The night of the interviews when she came out wearing a red and white striped dress with a large bow, white ankle socks, black shoes...her stylist was going for sweet and innocent and Maysee fit the part. That night when the tributes were supposed to be in bed, Haymitch snuck up to the dark and desolate roof in the hopes of getting a plan together for once he was inside of the arena.*

*"Mitchy?" Haymitch's head snapped around to see Maysilee standing across the way.*

*"What are you doing up here? You should be asleep."*

*He saw the alligator tears glistening in her eyes from ten feet away. "Please don't die out there. Please go home."*

*Haymitch knew it was dangerous to be seen together, but no one was on the roof...they were all alone and she was crying so he rushed to her and took her in his arms. "Maysee, you've got to be the one to go home. You can do it too, you know?" He pulled back and said, "Any merchant kid that has the balls to go to the Hob on her own can do anything in my book."*

*"Do you love me?" She played with the buttons of his pajama shirt.*

*"Whatcha gotta ask a stupid question like that for?" Haymitch was never that good at saying the words. "You know I do."*



*"Then will you do something for me?" Maysilee's voice was so quiet and sad.*

*Haymitch was willing to do anything for her. "You name it and I'll do it. Want me to blow this joint up? No problem." He gave her a grin.*

*She took his hands in hers and said, "I want you to make me a promise. So do it right now. Promise me you're going to keep your word."*

*Haymitch knit his brows and asked, "What am I promising here Maysee?"*

*Her voice became stern as she insisted, "If you love me Haymitch Abernathy you're just going to have to trust me and swear to me that you'll do this one thing for me without asking any questions. Now...do you love me? Yes or no?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Then say, 'I promise I'll do this for you Maysee no matter what,'" she said tenderly.*

*Haymitch was leery of what he was committing to, but he said the words anyway. "Okay. I promise I'll do this for you Maysee no matter what. Now tell me what the hell I'm doing?"*

*Maysilee stood up on her tiptoes and placed a kiss against his lips. "You're going to go home as the victor of the second Quarter Quell."*

*Haymitch began to shake his head. "Now wait one minute..."*

*"You promised, Mitchy." Maysilee took his hand in hers and began walking them towards the roof's door. "Now stop bellyaching and come to bed with me."*

*"What?" Haymitch stopped walking. "You want me to..." His eyes began scanning the roof for people just in case they weren't alone.*

*Maysilee turned to him and said, "You heard me." She played with his top button and said, "You can sneak back to your room in a couple of hours, but we only have a little bit of time left and I don't plan on wasting it away, do you?"*

*Haymitch shook his head back and forth in slow motion.*

*The remainder of the Games for him was more than painful, it was horrific. He went into them thinking he could handle anything, 'Who gives a shit about a bunch of strangers?' As it turned out, Haymitch did. He spent his days walking through the arena in search of a way out hoping to find Maysilee and make an escape, but there was no exit. He killed when he had to kill, he dodged when he needed to and when the Gamemakers pulled their stunt with the volcano eruption he, like the rest of the tributes, took refuge in the woods. When he came upon three Careers, he was sure his life would be over. He took out two of them then felt a knife at his throat. His time was up. Haymitch could actually hear the sound of the dart piercing the Career's flesh...Maysilee saved his life.*

*She was a sight for sore eyes. "We'd live longer with two of us." The sweet sound of her voice was music to Haymitch's ears.*

*He rubbed the spot where the knife had just been and said, "Guess you just proved that."*

*"Allies?" She asked him.*

*Haymitch gave her a curious stare and wondered, 'What are you up to, Maysee?' before answering, "Sounds good to me." He was relieved that she was finally by his side now he could get them out of there.*

*"We should find some shelter," Maysilee suggested while they dug through a dead tribute's pack. "I'm getting tired of constantly walking around this arena."*

*"No," Haymitch told her. "We need to keep moving on." He could tell she was on edge. Why wouldn't she be? They were being hunted down like prey.*

*"Why?" She turned to him in a huff.*

*"Because!" Haymitch couldn't very well come right out and say he was looking for a way to escape. He couldn't tell her he needed to find a safe way out of the arena for them so they could both live. The Capitol was watching...listening to their every word, but maybe he could hint at it. Not tell her about escaping. "Because it has to end somewhere, right? The arena can't go on forever."*

*"What do you expect to find?"*

*Haymitch shrugged, thinking, 'A way out of this hellhole.' "I don't know, but maybe...there's something we could use."*

*Maysilee twisted her lips a little then finally agreed. "Okay, Mitc...Haymitch. Let's go."*

*It had taken them two days, but they had finally made it, only when they did they came upon a hedge full of spikes and thorns. It was so thick they didn't know how they'd get through it. Maysilee had suggested they use one of the dead tribute's blow torch which worked. They walked through the hedge and found themselves on dry, flat land.*

*"That's all there is, Haymitch." There was a catch in Maysilee's voice when she saw the cliff with jagged rocks over the edge. "Let's go back."*

*This was Haymitch's last hope. Breaking her out of the arena was it for him. The sharp rocks stared back at him from the bottom of the cliff and Haymitch knew what he had to do. "No. I'm staying here."*

*"All right. There are only five of us left. May as well say goodbye now. Besides, I didn't want it to come down to you and me." Haymitch knew that if it was down to just him and Maysee she'd take her own life so he could live. He refused to give her the opportunity.*

*"Okay." He couldn't look at her. He listened as she walked away and began thinking to himself. 'I hope you forgive me for this, Maysee. You've proven that you can take care of yourself out here so you go kick their asses and win this thing. I know I never came right out and said the words but...' he kicked some rocks over the edge of the cliff, '...I love ya, Maysee. I do. When you get home, you let my family know that I love them too and if you could help them out every now and then...well...that'd be nice. And make sure you tell Evelyn I said...what the hell?' Haymitch looked down at his foot. 'Are you shitting me?' He bent down and picked up a rock and hurled it over the side of the cliff then waited. It was as though he was playing a game of catch with an invisible friend when the rock came back up and into his waiting hand. He began to laugh and thought to himself, 'You sons of bitches have thought of everything to keep us in here haven't you? Wouldn't want to lose one of your preci...' "Maysee?" He could hear her screaming. "Maysee! MAYSEE!" He never even thought about the use of his familiar nickname for her. He reached her just in time to see a bright pink bird dislodge its pointed beak from her neck and the trail of blood dripping from the bird's beak as it flew into the distance. "Maysilee," Haymitch sank to his knees and took her*

*hand. He watched as the life faded from her eyes and blood pooled around her. 'Don't leave me, Maysee,' He thought to himself. 'If you go I'll die in here. I'll never leave this arena. Maysee? Maysee?' Haymitch watched her die with her hand clamped around the mockingjay pin.*

The sound of a cannon firing from the television screen brought Haymitch back to the present, only it wasn't Maysilee's cannon, it was the one announcing Haymitch's victory.

"That force field at the bottom of the cliff," Peeta said, "it was like the one on the roof of the Training Center. The one that throws you back if you try to jump off and commit suicide. Haymitch found a way to turn it into a weapon."

"Not just against the other tributes, but against the Capitol too," Katniss added. "You know they didn't expect that to happen. It wasn't meant to be part of the arena. They never planned on anyone using it as a weapon. It made them look stupid that he figured it out. I bet they had a good time trying to put a spin on that one. Bet that's why I don't remember seeing it on television. It's almost as bad as us and the berries!"

The sound of Katniss' abrupt laughter tore right through Haymitch. "Almost, but not quite." He forgot all about the glass in his hand and drank directly from the bottle. He studied both Katniss and Peeta. She was laughing like a crazy person. He was shaking his head at her and giving Haymitch a look of regret. 'Yup,' Haymitch thought to himself. 'You know who you have to save.' "You know something, sweetheart..." Haymitch's words were cut short by the sudden stop of the train.

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 16: Embers, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Fifteen: Embers**

**We last left our group with the start of the uprising and the halt of their tribute train. Finnick and Johanna are now in the picture. Yay! I really love Johanna. She's one of my favorites to write dialogue for. Effie's in the process of setting up Viggo, but we'll only find out a small portion of that plan in this chapter. All will be revealed soon enough. Heeheehee.**

**Thanks to my betas S and A for their hard work! To all of you who read and review, I say YOU ROCK! CF: R Outtakes has a new chapter up, but only read if you're a believer in rated M for adult**

**MATURE OVER 18 themes. Again my tumblr addy is  
jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com**

**Let us hop aboard the tribute train...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

The sudden stop had Katniss instantly thinking that their train had broken down like it had while they were on their Victory Tour. "Oh, great. Effie's going to love this." She took on her escort's Capitol accent as she sat back against the sofa cushion next to Peeta. "We're not going to be on schedule and tomorrow's a big, big, big day."

"Knock it off, Katniss," Peeta automatically scolded her as he usually did when she made fun of Effie.

Haymitch's vision was drawn out the window towards the large hovercraft that had landed with Peacekeepers rushing from it and heading towards their train. "Go to bed." He turned his attention to Katniss and Peeta. "Both of you. Now!"

From the tone of their mentor's voice, they didn't have to be told twice. They hopped up from their sitting positions on the sofa, took each others' hands and headed straight down the hall towards Katniss' quarters.

Peeta saw why Haymitch had wanted them behind closed doors; though he didn't think it would make much of a difference if they were in the sitting room or in bed. If the Peacekeepers wanted them, they would get them no matter where they were; still, he encouraged Katniss to move. "Go, Katniss," he whispered hoarsely. "Hurry."

Katniss could see the Peacekeepers entering the train as she and Peeta took shelter inside of her bedroom. She closed the door tightly

behind her, leaned up against it and stared at him. "What should we do?" Though she had only rushed twenty or so yards down the train's corridor, she felt as though she had sprinted a mile.

"I don't know." The only thing Peeta could think of was to follow Haymitch's order. "Get in bed."

"What?" Katniss' pulse was racing. The Capitol had caused so many deaths and made it look like an accident over the years. She was certain this is what they were up to now. They weren't going to wait for her and Peeta to enter the arena and give them a chance to get out alive; they were going to cause some sort of terrible train accident while they were on their way to the Games.

"Get in bed, Katniss," Peeta ordered her as he stripped off his pants and shirt.

Katniss threw her robe to the side, hopped under the covers and stared at her bedroom door waiting for the arrival of their death squad. "Peeta?" She whispered loudly at him. "Why on earth am I in bed? If they're coming to kill us, I'll be damned if I'm going to lie down and take it."

"Shut up, Katniss. Please." Peeta quickly crawled under the covers and took her in his arms. He listened as the sound of the Peacekeepers got closer to them. "Kiss me."

"What?" Katniss looked at him as though a second head had just sprouted out of his neck.

Peeta grabbed her in a passionate embrace and began kissing her. "Put your arms around me," He whispered in her ear. "Do it. Now."



Katniss threw her arms around his neck and returned his kiss, only to be instantly interrupted by the door flying open and two Peacekeepers making their way into their room. They jumped apart startled by their brusque entrance. "Don't you knock?" Katniss practically snarled at the pristinely uniformed guards.

"Do you mind?" Peeta turned to face them. "We're kind of in the middle of something here."

Both guards stood back staring at the couple they had obviously interrupted until one of them came to their senses. "Is there anyone else in this room?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Katniss gave them a frustrated sigh. The other Peacekeeper searched their room while Katniss and Peeta sat up in bed. When they found nothing Katniss said, "Satisfied?" She could feel Peeta's grip tightening on her as a warning.

"Would you mind telling us what's going on?" At this point Peeta was fairly sure they weren't there to kill them.

"Stay in your room. Your escort will get you for your morning meal," one of the guards snapped the order at them prior to slamming the door and locking them in for the remainder of the night.

Their eyes met as they let out huge breaths of air. "What was that about?" Peeta said softly.

"I have no clue." Katniss went to the window, trying to sneak a peek at what was happening outside. Peacekeepers were searching the surrounding area including the underside of the train. "They're conducting some kind of search."

"What for?"

"I've been on the same train as you, Peeta. You really think I know?"

"I was thinking out loud, Katniss. Don't get snippy with me." Peeta began to wonder what would cause Peacekeepers to stop their moving train dead in its tracks. "You don't think one of the victors escaped and is trying to stowaway or something do you?"

Katniss rolled her eyes at him as she noticed the Peacekeepers boarding the hovercraft and the giant machine disappearing into thin air. "Yes, Peeta. A victor escaped and has decided to hide out on a tribute train to the Capitol as their getaway," she said dryly. The entire event lasted all of fifteen minutes.

"Don't be so moody. It's just...what else can they be searching for?"

Behind them, far off in the distance, Katniss could make out large fire and a cloud of smoke billowing above it. "Peeta," she whispered, calling him over with her hand. "Look at that."

He went to her side and stared at where she was pointing. "What do you think happened?" Peeta's mind started to drift, throwing about ideas. Wondering if there had been an accident of some sort, perhaps another tribute train had gotten derailed. "That's huge."

"Where do you think we are? Like...what district?"

Peeta began trying to figure out approximately how far they had gone in his head. "I think we're on the outskirts of Five, but I'm not sure. The tribute trains aren't like the ones for the Victory Tour. We don't go directly into the center of the districts so it's hard to tell."

Katniss' mind began working in overdrive trying to access the geography lessons they had in school. "Crap," her voice was low. "I should've paid more attention in class."

"Why?" Peeta's eyes were darting around as the train went into reverse. "We're going backwards."

"Towards that fire?"

"Looks like."

Katniss leaned close to him and whispered in his ear, "Isn't that Eight, Peeta?"

They shared concerned expression when he answered her. "It could be."

It wasn't long before the train switched tracks and lurched forward once again. Katniss cupped her hands over the sides of her face and squinted out the window trying to see as much as she could through the darkness, but other than the distant flames which was quickly disappearing in their wake, there was nothing but blackness. "What the hell?" She turned away from the window and sat on their bed. "What was that all about?"

Peeta crawled up beside her tucking his legs under the covers. "I have no idea," he checked their door to confirm that it was locked, "and it's not like we can go and ask." He voiced his thoughts aloud. "Maybe there was a train accident and someone did escape?"

"Wouldn't we have seen that fire earlier then? Isn't Twelve the furthest district from the Capitol? What train would've been behind us?"

"I don't know," Peeta answered her all too reasonable questions with one of his own. "When do you suppose that happened?"

"That fire had to have started pretty recently...I mean the train just went through that district." Katniss rested her head against his

shoulder. She could feel his heart racing against the palm of her hand as she rested it against his chest. She lifted her lips to his ear and whispered, "You don't suppose..." Memories of the uprising in District Eight were vivid and clear. "Maybe they started again...you know...in Eight?"

Peeta wasn't sure what was happening outside of their train or in the surrounding districts. All he knew was that even talking...whispering about their knowledge of the uprising in Eight on a tribute train was dangerous. He whispered back, "I think we need to forget about this...pretend it never happened and get some sleep." Yet in the back of both of their minds they couldn't stop thinking about the rebellion and wondering if it had finally begun.

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Effie Trinket wasn't too pleased with the situation at hand. Arriving late in the Capitol the day of the Tribute Parade was unacceptable, regardless of the reason. 'Debris on the tracks,' she thought about the excuse the Peacekeepers had given her the previous night. 'More like fighting in the districts.' It took all of Effie's reserves not to pump her fist in the air and shout out in joy knowing the uprisings were in full swing. Unfortunately Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta still had no clue of what was going on. 'Haymitch will know soon enough,' she silently told herself as she adjusted her blue jacket with gold trim. 'Tonight Cinna and Portia will fill him in on everything and then they'll find a way to bring Katniss and Peeta in on the escape plan. If all goes according to plan, we'll have them out of that arena within the first twenty-four hours.'

The mahogany mirror Effie was staring at herself in had been a family heirloom. A piece of furniture that had been handed down for

generations. Items such as these, that survived the Dark Days, were treasured amongst the citizens of the Capitol. Once upon a time Effie had adored the item. Now when she saw her reflection in the mirror it only reminded her of how shallow and callous she had been her whole life long. A year ago she was walking around the Capitol telling everyone how Katniss and Peeta had overcome their barbarism. Effie's eyes drifted to the side as she thought, 'and what did you base that on? Their ability to use a knife and a fork while eating a meal?' She let out a sigh. 'They overcame oppression, starvation...' Effie looked at Peeta's self portrait, '...abuse.' She faced the mirror, which had once been one of the symbols of her high stature within the Capitol, suppressing the urge to hurl something through the reflective glass and promised herself that she would make up for all the years she had wasted dwelling on material things. For all the years she had helped to kill the children of District Twelve by calling out their names on Reaping Day.

Effie stood up, dusted off her skirt though it didn't need it, gave her gloves a tug securing the hidden object within, in place and went on her way. Her car was waiting for her to take her to the Tribute Parade. Each year the escorts watched it with their team then took their tributes to their suites. This year Effie had other plans. She entered the building, making sure to be seen by all of the escorts, greeted as many guests as possible then slipped up to Cinna and Portia who were waiting at the edge of the crowd next to the heavy velvet curtain covering the exit door.

"Don't you two look lovely," Effie greeted them with a smile.

"Effie," Cinna was obviously pleased to see her.

"Effie you look divine," Portia placed a kiss upon her cheek. "I'm surprised you're not watching the parade with Viggo this year."

"Portia, you know as well as I, an escort's job is never done."  
Everyone knew Effie's business at the Capitol and presumed she would be sitting on stage with the rest of the official's significant others, but her job as the District Twelve escort could not be ignored. "Katniss and Peeta are still my responsibility for the remainder of the Games."

"Well," Portia gave her a soft smile. "They're just about to start."

"Wonderful," Effie gripped Portia's hand in her gloved one allowing her to feel the bump within.

The rebels knew that Effie would be planting a camera in the escort's medical bay prior to the Games, they just didn't know when. Timing was always the key when it came to Effie's disappearances. Since her relationship with Viggo started, her every move was continually questioned. Even her stop at Tigris' shop had been inquired about. Fortunately Effie was smart enough to leave the woman's store with several purchased items for Viggo himself. Tonight's move would have to be done quickly and the large crowd was her perfect cover.

Portia glanced towards Effie and gave her a nod. "You'll just adore what we've done this year, Effie."

"I have the utmost faith in your skills, Portia." The second the music started, Effie tapped Portia on the back informing her of her departure, slipped behind the curtain and headed to the escort's medical bay.

The tiny camera she was hiding had a motion detector in it and would only function when someone entered the room. Its signal would be initialized via Plutarch immediately after the Tribute Parade ended. They didn't expect anyone to use the room immediately, so broadcasts would be picked up, however, the first sign of someone going into the room would be "accidentally" noticed by one of Plutarch's control room

engineers thus bringing it to the attention of the Head Gamemaker. From there Plutarch would bring it to President Snow and suggest that they leave the feed active in order to find the source of the deception. Viggo had been one of the Capitol officials that had known about the medical bay for years and kept it from President Snow. Once President Snow found out that one of his trusted officials had been going behind his back for so long that would be the end of him, but Effie wasn't going to stop there. She had a plan to not only capture Viggo on camera admitting to keeping the room a secret, but making it appear to be that she, herself, had been against the deception. By doing this, she knew that the man she had spent the past few months with was as good as dead. She rationalized her part in his impending demise by telling herself that he was constantly watching recaps of the Games and relishing in the deaths of children. Effie slipped off her shoes, climbed up a shelf in her snug fitting Capitol attire and adhered the miniature camera in its optimal vantage point. Once she was satisfied that it was out of sight, she headed back to the parade.

Her shoes were clicking as she headed through the hallway and back to her spot next to Cinna and Portia just in time to catch the tributes chariots turning around and exiting the City Center. "Cinna, Portia, they were spectacular!" Effie had yet to actually view Katniss and Peeta, but the moment she saw them her breath caught in her chest. She placed her hand on Cinna's shoulder and whispered in his ear. "No one will ever forget Peeta and Katniss Mellark."

Cinna patted her hand and gave her a smile. "That's just what we had planned."

As the final chariot exited and the doors closed, Caesar Flickerman signed off for the night. Effie stared at the large television screen that had gone black and sucked in a breath knowing that Plutarch had switched on the camera that she had hidden. It was then that she

came to the realization that she had entered her own arena. Effie Trinket had just made her first kill.

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Finnick paced around the area that housed the chariots for the Tribute Parade letting his eyes take in his fellow victor's costumes. He wasn't all that impressed, but nothing in the Capitol impressed him. He was at his happiest at home, fishing off of a quiet pier with Annie by his side. When his wandering gaze landed on Johanna dressed like a tree, his laughter bubbled up from deep within. "Don't you look..."

"Like a friggin' joke?" Johanna rubbed at her temple as though her head was pounding. "Our stylists need to be put out of their misery."

"It's not that bad, Johanna." Finnick tried to keep himself from laughing at her obvious discomfort, but he couldn't help the snort that escaped.

"Bite me."

"Lighten up, Johanna," Finnick put his hand on her arm before she could leave. "It's the hat. Those branches..." his lips quirked. He had known Johanna since she came back to the Capitol as a mentor the year after she had won her Games. He had tried to warn her about turning Snow down when it came to selling herself, telling her that she'd lose everything if she didn't play by the Capitol's rules, but Johanna Mason was more than stubborn. She was as immovable as the trees in her district. By the time she got home from that year's Games, everyone she loved had perished in a sudden forest fire. Considering her family no longer worked in the lumber camps, there was no explanation as to why they were out amongst the woods, why the fire appeared to be controlled and why it occurred in the wee



hours of the morning. From that moment on Finnick rarely saw Johanna smile and when she did it was usually at the expense of others. She kept everyone a safe distance away from her with the exception of the fellow victors that Snow was currently exploiting. Finnick being the main one. "On the bright side Johanna, you give new meaning to the term, sporting wood." He couldn't help but to tease her. She was such an easy target at the moment and Johanna was rarely an easy target.

Johanna threw Finnick a death glare and told him, "Why don't you go screw yourself, Odair?" Finnick tried to subdue his laughter for his friend's sake. "Go to hell, Finnick!"

"I'll be there in a few days. I hear you'll be joining me." His laughter quickly faded away.

She huffed out a breath and said, "Don't remind me." Johanna reached up for her hat, ripped it off her head and said, "This sucks!"

"There's not much we can do about it, Johanna. We're going back in." Finnick shook her playfully by the upper arms and said, "Come on. We can do this." He put her tree limb covered hat back on her head, but it kept falling to the side and suggested, "You should probably find your stylist. You're looking a bit...limp."

After a few choice words Johanna glared at Finnick and said, "If you want to taunt someone with your perverse commentary, go give the cold hearted prude some shit and leave me alone." She gestured her head towards Katniss who was standing alone by her chariot. "I'm sure she could use a good dose of your...wit," Johanna chuckled to herself as she made her way to her stylist.

Finnick stood back and watched as Katniss petted the jet black horses that would lead the District Twelve chariot into the parade. He

sauntered towards her thinking about Johanna's use of the word "prude" and thought, 'Hmmm... why not? Surely she knows I'm on her side and it's all in fun.' He stepped up behind her, picking up a handful of sugar cubes off of silver tray and tossed one into his mouth. He slid his body alongside of hers, staying just out of reach. "Hello, Katniss," he spoke to her as though they were dear friends.

"Hello, Finnick," Katniss didn't flinch.

He held his hand out to her displaying his tiny pile of sweet treats. "Would you like some sugar?" He could see her jaw tensing and momentarily thought 'it could be just as much fun teasing you as Johanna.' "They're supposed to be for the horses, but who cares? They've got years to eat sugar, whereas you and I...well, if we see something sweet, we better snatch it up."

"No, thanks." Katniss gave him a quick once over and said, "But I'd love to borrow your outfit sometime though."

Finnick hated the fact that he was wearing nothing but a net tied at his crotch, but sex sold and everyone in the Capitol knew Finnick Odair's body was for sale. Naturally he'd have to sell himself in the arena in order to get sponsors. He promptly changed the subject saying to her, "You're absolutely terrifying me in that getup of yours." He slowly licked his lips. "What happened to the pretty little girl dresses?"

Katniss stared him straight in the eyes. "I outgrew them."

Finnick let his eyes roam up and down her black catlike body suit and let them rest on her mockingjay pin as his fingers played with the collar of her costume. "It's too bad about this Quell thing. You could have made out like a bandit in the Capitol. Jewels, money...anything you wanted."

"I don't like jewels, and I have more money than I need." Her voice grew harder. "What do you spend all of yours on anyway, Finnick?"

"Oh, I haven't dealt in anything as common as money for years," Finnick finally lifted his eyes to hers when he heard her question.

"Then how do they pay you for the pleasure of your company?"

Finnick hadn't thought of Katniss as "cold hearted" like Johanna did. The way Peeta had spoken about her during their meeting in the Capitol hideout had convinced Finnick that Katniss wasn't pretending to be in love during the Games simply to keep her and Peeta alive, but actually cared for the boy. However, her cruel inquiry about payment for his...services took him aback. He tilted his head, placed his lips dangerously close to hers and whispered, "With secrets. What about you, girl on fire? Do you have any secrets worth my time?" He could see the blush creeping up her skin when she answered him.

"No," she whispered back in an even tone. "I'm an open book. Everybody seems to know my secrets before I know them myself."

Finnick could see how uneasy he was making her and was suddenly filled with guilt. He smiled at her and said, "Unfortunately, I think that's true." He glanced to the side noticing that Peeta was walking towards them. "Here comes Peeta. Sorry you have to cancel your wedding. I know how devastating that must be for you." He popped another sugar cube into his mouth as he walked in the opposite direction to the pair and thought, 'I really am sorry, Katniss. Sorry we're all going through this.' Finnick had to force the smiles he gave to everyone else for the remainder of the night with the exception of the one he gave to Annie who accompanied them to their fourth floor suite after the parade. He couldn't wait until their escort; Julia excused herself from their company for the night so he could finally be alone with Annie. He could finally drop the act and simply be himself.

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Katniss felt her skin crawling when Finnick Odair licked his lips and asked her what happened to the "little girl dresses" she had worn. When Cinna had put her in her costume earlier she had felt confident and bold. She had felt like a woman.

*"I swear if you start to cry, I'll kill you here and now," Katniss snapped at Cinna the second he walked into the room at the Remake Center.*

*Cinna chuckled a little. "I missed you too. Had a damp morning?"*

*"You could wring me out," Katniss sneered at him.*

*"Don't worry, I always channel my emotions into my work. That way I don't hurt anyone but myself," Cinna led her into the next room for lunch.*

*Katniss pointed towards the room they were in and said, "I can't go through that again." Her pets had spent their morning crying over the fact that she and Peeta were going back into the arena. Sure it was a nice gesture, but after the first two minutes Katniss thought... 'Okay, let's move on.' After twenty minutes Katniss was certain they were simply trying to play it up in case she won again. When they reached the sixty minute mark Katniss thought maybe Peeta had been right about people not being happy about them going back into the arena, but she knew she was right too and the moment the blood started to flow the tears would dry and the bets would fly. When they moved into the second hour of tears Katniss was ready to throw her prep team into the arena with her and take them out one by one.*

*"I'll talk to them. It won't happen again," Cinna assured her. "Come on. Let's eat."*

*Before Cinna pushed the button on the table that would make their lunch appear Katniss called out to him, "Wait! That's not lamb stew is it?"*

*"No," Cinna quirked a brow at her. "Why? Lamb stewed out too?"*

*"You could say that." Katniss sat down at the table and eagerly waited for her meal which she ate two helpings of. "We need more of this chocolate." She scraped at the pot that held the creamy substance used to dip fruit into.*

*"Would you like more fruit too?"*

*"No. Just the chocolate...and tell them not to be so damn stingy with the stuff. What are they...afraid they're going to run out?" Katniss ran her finger around the inside of the tiny silver pot and sucked it off.*

*"God, this is good."*

*Cinna let out a little laugh and said, "Maybe we should talk about your costume while we wait for the chocolate?"*

*"Sure. So, what are we wearing for the opening ceremonies? Headlamps or fire?"*

*"Something along those lines," Cinna smiled. When the chocolate arrived he accepted it. When the prep team showed up he turned them away, claiming they did such a wonderful job on Katniss he no longer needed their services for the rest of the day. Once they were gone he turned to Katniss and said, "Now you'll be dry for the parade." He braided her hair in the same fashion her mother had done for her reaping the year prior, then applied her makeup giving her dark,*

*smoldering eyes, arched brows, sharp cheekbones and deep purple lips all accentuated with strategically placed iridescent highlights. "Put this on." He handed her a fitted black jumpsuit and black boots.*

*Katniss shimmied into the outfit, finding it a little more difficult to get into than she anticipated. "I probably shouldn't have had that extra helping of chocolate," she said as she squeezed herself into the tight garment.*

*"Come here you wretched girl." Cinna tugged the back of the jumpsuit up and said, "Gained a little weight since I've seen you last?"*

*"Yeah, my mom put us on a diet to help us bulk up for the Games."*

*Cinna gripped the front of the black jumpsuit, gently yanking on it until it was in place. "Well, it worked. You're bulkier."*

*"Good," Katniss smirked as he zipped her up.*

*"Turn around." Cinna had to keep his eyes from popping out of his head when he looked at her. The young girl that had stood on a stage as a victor in a pretty yellow dress was gone. He placed the crown on her head, adjusted the lighting in the room to mimic twilight, switched on her power button then turned her towards the mirror. "Well?"*

*"Wow, Cinna." Katniss ran her hands gingerly over her body and up to the crown. "How did you do this?"*

*"Let's just say, Portia and I have had a remarkable source of inspiration for your costumes this year." He placed her mockingjay pin in the center of her jumpsuit, right between her breasts. Cinna watched her as she took in the ever changing colors of her costume. "I think your days of pink lipstick and ribbons are behind you."*

*Katniss felt completely empowered. Cinna had hit the nail on the head with his costume design. She was no longer staring at a young girl in the mirror, but a woman. Her body no longer looked like a board with bumps at the top of it to distinguish that she was, in fact, female. It was curvy...almost voluptuous. 'No,' Katniss thought to herself. 'You're not voluptuous, but you're definitely not a little girl anymore.' She had shapely hips, a tiny waist and she wasn't sure where it came from, but...she leaned her head forward and stared at herself in the mirror. 'I have cleavage,' she thought to herself. 'Cinna's a miracle worker.' She began thinking of the rest of the victors that would be entering the Games with her and Peeta. They probably viewed them as a couple of children...easy to slaughter, but Katniss knew the reflection of the woman staring back at her was no child. She lifted the corner of her lips in a wicked grin and said, "Yes, this is exactly what I needed to face the others."*

Now, with one brush of his disgusting tongue across his lips, Finnick Odair had stripped her of those mature, womanly feelings. Katniss wanted to grab the blankets they used to keep the horses warm and wrap them around herself, but she stood her ground with Finnick. Determined not to give him the pleasure of seeing her revert back to her childlike insecurities. She often wondered about him. Peeta had said there were other victors that were part of the rebellion, but he never named names claiming that the stories they had were theirs to tell. The way Finnick was currently treating Katniss, she was certain he had nothing to do with the rebellion. She could feel his eyes boring through her when he stared at her mockingjay pin, which was centered between her breasts and she wished Cinna had placed it anywhere but. The feel of his hand when he took hold of her collar and rubbed it between his fingertips caused the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end. The temptation to kick Finnick where his net was knotted became overwhelming, but fighting with the other tributes was against the rules and Katniss didn't even want to imagine what

form of punishment the Capitol would come up with if she gave into her urges. 'They'd probably take it out on Peeta,' she thought to herself. For that reason alone she used Peeta's weapon...words. "Then how do they pay you for the pleasure of your company?" Katniss could see the slight twitch in Finnick's eye when she asked that of the multitude of women he had been seen with in the Capitol over the years.

Finnick's lips were a little too close for her comfort when he whispered, "With secrets. What about you, girl on fire? Do you have any secrets worth my time?"

Katniss could feel the blush creeping up her skin at his actions. She had no clue how she kept her voice steady, perhaps because she didn't raise it above a whisper when she lied, "No. I'm an open book. Everybody seems to know my secrets before I know them myself."

"Unfortunately, I think that's true." Finnick's eyes flickered to the side. "Here comes Peeta. Sorry you have to cancel your wedding. I know how devastating that must be for you."

Katniss watched Finnick as he wandered off thinking, 'I didn't have to cancel my wedding...PIG!' She took a few deep breaths in order to get her temper in check before Peeta reached her and reminded herself once again that fighting with other tributes was against the rules. The second she felt Peeta's hand on the small of her back she felt the familiar sense of security he always brought with him.

Peeta could tell that Katniss was upset. He only hoped that Finnick wasn't the reason for it. He hadn't told Katniss the names of the victors that were part of the rebellion. Back when he had first brought up the rebellion with her it seemed like a breach of trust, but now he wished that he had told her about everyone. 'Why didn't you tell her after the



reading of the card?' He silently berated himself. "What did Finnick Odair want?" He glanced towards the scantily clad victor.

Katniss leaned her lips close to Peeta's the way Finnick had done to her and whispered, "He offered me sugar and wanted to know all of my secrets."

"Ew," Peeta grimaced and placed his hands on her hips. "Really?"

A look of disgust crossed Katniss' face. "I'll tell you the rest when my skin stops crawling." She stared into his eyes and let out a little breath. "I'm glad you're here."

"Sorry I didn't get here a few minutes earlier," Peeta ran his hands up and down her arms. He looked around the room at the rest of the victors and asked her, "Do you think we would've wound up like this if only one of us had won? Just another part of the freak show?"

"Not me," Katniss said with a hint of condescension in her voice, "but you...absolutely."

"Oh," he smiled at her. "Why...absolutely me?"

"Because you have a weakness for beautiful things and I don't." She looked at him teasingly and gave him a voice to match, "They would've lured you into their Capitol ways and you'd be lost entirely."

Peeta let out a little chuckle, leaning into her, quietly saying, "Having an eye for beauty isn't the same thing as a weakness." He trailed one finger down her arm. "Except possibly when it comes to you."

Katniss arched her brow thinking, 'Finnick Odair's got nothing on Peeta Mellark.' "I thought we agreed that I was a source of strength for you."

"You're both. However..." Peeta leaned back, ran his hands over her waist and looked her up and down. "Seeing you dressed like that makes me think you're definitely going to be my weakness tonight."

"Thank you," she reached up and straightened his crown. "I needed that." Once again she felt the way Cinna had intended her to feel when donning her costume for the parade. She was no longer Katniss Everdeen, girl on fire, but Katniss Mellark, smoldering woman. "Have you seen your suit turned on? We're going to be fabulous again."

"Absolutely." The sound of music filled the air as Peeta stepped onto the chariot holding his hand out for Katniss to join him. "But Portia says we're to be very...above it all...upset with the whole predicament. No waving or anything like that." He glanced around the large waiting area and asked, "Where are they anyway?"

"I don't know." The line of chariots began to slowly descend into the City Center. "Maybe we should turn ourselves on?" Katniss asked.

The noise from the crowd swelled as their costumes glowed from behind the district's chariots. Peeta held his hand out to her and said, "Remember, we're unforgiving...furious that we're here again." He had no clue why he was reminding her, but saying it out loud seemed to accentuate the actuality of it all for him.

Katniss squeezed his hand in hers and stared straight ahead into nothingness. "We don't have to remember that, Peeta. We are furious about being here again." For the first time since the cameras started rolling Katniss felt like she could finally be herself. Show the Capitol...the whole nation exactly what she thought of the Games. What she thought about the fact that she and Peeta were going back into the arena. As they made their way through the City Center, she blocked out the sounds from the crowd and concentrated on the feeling of Peeta's hand in hers, reminding herself that she only had a

few precious days left to enjoy his touch allowing it to fuel the fire within her as it had in the past. She glanced at their image only once on the screens, but quickly drew her eyes away from it. Had she continued to look at it, the pain and anger in Peeta's eyes would've been her undoing. Instead she focused on the man that stood at the podium. The man who had brought the scent of blood and roses into her home. The man that was determined to kill her and Peeta and wished death upon him. 'One day,' Katniss said to herself, 'You will know this feeling of being hunted. I only wish I could be the one to hunt you down.'

Peeta could feel the pulse pounding in Katniss' wrist as their chariot slowly moved forward in the precession. Her fingers linked with his, the extension of himself, made his heart race and his blood boil. He could hear the audience chanting out their names, cheering in support for them during the Games though it did nothing but anger him. He glanced up at the screen for a moment and focused on Katniss. She had changed so much in the past year. Not just physically, but mentally. They had both changed. He had become a bit harder, she a bit softer. He stared straight ahead thinking about the little time they had left together, hating himself for wasting some of it training for the Games, but he hated the man at the podium even more. The man that endangered an entire nation for his own personal gain. 'I will not let you take her life,' he silently vowed. 'If killing me is what it takes to put a stop to this vengeance, then do it, but you will not kill my wife.'

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Alcohol had been an escape for Haymitch for way too many years to count. His stint with sobriety while training for the Quell was the longest he had gone without a drink in over two decades. There was

no denying that his body felt a hell of a lot better without the constant flow of booze going through his system, plus the lack of vomiting wasn't to be ignored, but nothing could take the place of drowning his troubles away until he passed out. Even if his escape only lasted for a few hours, it was better than dealing with reality the entire time. Haymitch pulled out his flask and took a long swallow as he stared out the giant double doors that housed the chariots for the Tribute Parade. He had gotten there in time to see Finnick's exchange with Katniss, but chose to stand to the side. He wanted to see how Katniss dealt with Finnick's flirtatious ways, and he had to admit, he was impressed with the girl. She stood her ground and didn't punch Finnick. Considering where she started the year before, Haymitch was pleased. Haymitch watched the giant television screen that showed the victors one by one, he knew them all, spent years with them, but none of them meant as much to him as the last two. He thought about where they had started and how far they had come.

Katniss had started off as a temperamental, stubborn, mule. Haymitch chuckled to himself recalling how he couldn't tell her anything without her fighting him the entire time. Not much really changed there, she still fights with him, but eventually she gives in...on occasion. She almost always gives in when Peeta asks her to do something. It amazed Haymitch the way she responded to Peeta. She was a completely different person around him. When Katniss allowed her guard to drop, she wasn't that bad to be around. She was smart, kind of funny but the thing that surprised Haymitch the most was how different she'd become. Her face didn't always seem so stoic anymore. There would be times when he'd catch her staring at Peeta across the room and she looked like she was glowing. Normally if Katniss was caught at doing something like that she'd scowl, but lately she just grinned and turned away. Oh, she was still full of piss and vinegar, Haymitch heard enough of their fights through their open bedroom window, but he also heard what went on after the fights and

sometimes he swore that Katniss would pick those fights on purpose. 'Yup,' he thought to himself. 'His kids are growing up.'

When Haymitch first met Peeta he was a love sick boy willing to die for the girl that he loved. Haymitch didn't understand Peeta's reasoning. At the time he had forgotten what it was like to feel that way about someone. Didn't believe that a kid could know what it truly meant to be in love, but in the end, it was Peeta that had showed Haymitch...that had showed the entire country what it was to love someone. Over the course of the last year, Haymitch had the pleasure of watching Peeta go from a boy to a man. Not only taking responsibility as a husband to Katniss, but as an older brother to Prim, a son to Evelyn and forged a friendship with Gale, which Haymitch found to be miraculous. Peeta showed bravery and courage while standing up to the new Head in District Twelve and still maintained his humility. Now here he was again, having to face the arena, willing to put his life on the line for the woman he loves. Haymitch made the kid a promise to get Katniss out alive...he made them both a promise, but it was Peeta's that he would keep. Katniss would hate him for it, but it was the price he'd have to pay.

Haymitch watched as the chariots started to make their way back towards their holding area and stepped to the side. He drained the remainder of alcohol from his flask and looked around the room for an attendant so he could place an order for more.

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The path from the mines towards Victor's Village seemed longer...hotter...lonelier to Gale without Katniss by his side, though he had never made the trip with her he missed her presence. He missed his friend. Both of them. Gale had to admit, it had been a long and

painful road, but he had learned a lot about himself along the way and one of the things he learned was that he was just as stubborn, if not more so, than Katniss. He was sure he'd always have feelings for her, she was his first love, but their friendship had endured and throughout the last year Gale had not only kept Katniss' friendship, but gained Peeta's as well. Gale had to respect the guy. He had never met anyone like him before. He'd give you the shirt off his back if you asked for it. 'Hell,' Gale thought, 'he'd give it to you even if you didn't ask for it.' Accepting Katniss and Peeta's relationship had been tough. Then their engagement...by the time they were living together Gale had finally come to grips with it. Tonight as he made his way towards Katniss' house, 'her mother's house,' he mentally corrected himself. He felt the loss of his friends and wished they were there with him. Hoped for their safe return to District Twelve, though he knew he'd lose one for sure, he still held onto the hope that there would be a repeat of the year before where the Gamemakers would allow two victors.

Gale knocked on the door expecting it to be answered by Prim or her mother, not by the baker. "Mr. Mellark," Gale was taken aback.

"Hello, Gale." The door was held open. "Come on in."

"Hi Gale," Prim was sitting at the kitchen table with her mother. "Come to watch the parade?"

"Yeah," Gale took his dirty boots off at the door. "Can I wash up somewhere?"

"Kitchen sink is fine or the bathroom if you prefer," Mrs. Everdeen said as she stood up. "Have you eaten anything? Let me make you a plate. I've got some beef and potatoes leftover."

"Thank you. That would be great," Gale went to the sink and turned on the hot water, enjoying the feel of the instant warmth. "So...um...what brings you here Mr. Mellark?"

"Had a delivery for my son's family," he lifted up the plain white paper bag.

"We asked him to stay for the parade," Prim said. "When you're done with dinner you can have some of the cookies Peeta sent to us."

Gale's eyes flashed to Prim's. "Peeta sent you cookies?"

"Yup," she had a bit of a smile. "He put in a daily order with his dad to send us something and today it was shortbread cookies with primroses on them."

"Sounds like something Peeta would do," Gale's boyish grin flashed across his face.

They made small talk as Gale ate his plate of food, all of them avoiding the topic of the people that were sorely missed until it was time for the parade. Prim and Mr. Mellark brought a tray of tea and cookies into the living room as they all sat around the television and the voice of Caesar Flickerman filled the room.

"Welcome. Welcome," Caesar's smile was as bright as usual, highlighted by his lavender suit and hair. "Over one-hundred-thousand people are here to catch a glimpse of these victors turned tributes as they make their way into the City Center tonight. And what a night it will be!"

Gale glanced around the room. He did a double-take when his eyes landed on the baker and stayed there for a moment as he absorbed the similarities between father and son.

"I wonder if they'll be on fire again this year?" Prim asked from her position next to her mother.

"Bet it's going to be even better than that," the baker answered.

Gale watched as, district by district, the chariots entered the City Center. Some of the tributes were pathetic to look at, not just their costumes, but the people themselves. Worn down from alcohol, drugs, age or a combination of the three. Some looked to be fit, but none of them could hold a candle to Katniss and Peeta. Of this he was sure.

"As you can see, District Twelve's fire seemed to catch," Caesar's guffawed at his play on words, "from last year and many of the districts are utilizing that motif." He paused. "District Three has most certainly made the most out of their electrical designs by lighting up their costumes this year."

"Don't remember the last time District Three had a victor. Do you?" Gale asked.

"Been awhile," the baker answered, not ripping his eyes from the screen.

"District Ten seems to be making use of the fire by...I believe they've dressed their victors as cattle with flaming belts. That's very...creative." It was obvious to everyone that Caesar was searching for something positive to say about the use of the flames. "Here comes District Eleven... Oh my! OH MY WORD! LOOK AT DISTRICT TWELVE!"

Gale shot up from his chair and let out a shout along with the rest of the room. "Yes! YES!" Katniss and Peeta were dressed in black jumpsuits with black belts and black boots. On top of their heads they wore their victory crowns, only they weren't made of gold they were



made of heavy black coal. As they rode through the City Center their suits and crowns began to transform from black coal to soft gold...light orange...bright blue...blazing red...they were glowing from head to toe like the embers of a fire. Their bright eyes shining through their dark makeup saying all that their words cannot. "You tell 'em, Catnip," Gale murmured to himself. He could read her mind...could read both of their minds. He knew they were both silently telling the man about to read his speech that he's the one that should burn in hell.

"Thank you. Thank you," President Snow took the stage, waving to the crowd; his eyes kept traveling downwards towards the illuminated pair. "Victors, we thank you for your sacrifice. Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!"

"That's it? That's all he had to say?" Gale turned himself away from the television. "He usually has more to say than that."

"He looked a bit distracted this year," Prim smiled. "I think Katniss and Peeta took him by surprise."

Mrs. Everdeen poured some tea for them. "I think they took us all by surprise. They were fantastic."

"Did you see how angry they looked?" Gale was smiling. "I bet Catnip loved that."

"Oh, I know she did," Prim's smile matched Gale's.

The baker lifted up a cookie in his hand and said, "To Katniss and Peeta."

They each grabbed a cookie and echoed, "To Katniss and Peeta."

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The parade was a success. They were fabulous, yet Katniss felt like the glowing embers of her suit had seeped through her skin and was flowing through her veins. The sight of President Snow turned her stomach into knots, furious little rock hard knots.

"That went well," Peeta was pleased with the way the parade turned out, but hated that they had to be subjected to it at all. "Think we should find Effie or should we just go on up to our room?" He held his hand out for Katniss to help her out of the chariot. He studied her as she stepped down and noticed how tense she was. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," her voice was curt. "Haymitch is over there," she could see him standing with the team from District Eleven.

"You want to go upstairs, Katniss?" Peeta asked, but it was too late, he could see Haymitch and his guests were making their way towards them.

Katniss did want to go up to their room, but she also wanted to find out about what happened in District Eleven after they had left from the Victory Tour. Seeder, a sixty year old victor walked up to Katniss and immediately took her into a hug. Before anything could be said, Katniss whispered into her ear, "The families?" She inquired about Rue and Thresh's families.

"They're alive," Seeder answered.

Chaff, a one armed victor and personal friend of Haymitch's threw his good arm around Katniss' neck and planted a kiss firmly on her lips. She yanked her head back and Chaff let out a huge belly laugh along with Haymitch.

Peeta took hold of her hand and pulled her to his side. A combination of shock and wonder crossed his face. "Come on, Katniss. The attendants want us to go up to our rooms."

Katniss looked over her shoulder and noticed the Capitol's staff ushering the twenty-four victors turned tributes onto the elevators. 'Wouldn't want them socializing with one another,' Katniss thought to herself. The entire evening's event had been completely different from the year prior in which she had found herself in a room full of frightened children and a handful of Careers. Now she was surrounded by Careers.

"This costume is horrible, isn't it?" Katniss glanced to her side and noticed Johanna Mason ripping her headdress off and throwing it behind her. "My stylist's an idiot. We've been trees for forty years. Wish I'd gotten Cinna. You look fantastic."

Peeta stood at the elevator doors hanging onto Katniss' hand listening to her and Johanna Mason and their pathetic attempt at girl talk. It was about the funniest thing he'd ever heard Katniss do. He was grateful when he heard the ding of the elevator announcing its arrival, but it was followed up with the sound of a zipper and Johanna letting out a sigh of relief as she kicked off her tree costume. 'Oh, crap,' Peeta's head was racing. 'Please don't get on our elevator Johanna. She's already in a bad mood. Please don't do it. Don't do it. Damn...you did it.'

"So, Peeta," Johanna placed a hand on her hip facing him as she jutted out her breasts. "I saw your paintings on television...they're amazing. You're really gifted."

'I swear, if you turn your head and look at her Peeta Mellark it'll be the last thing you do,' Katniss grit her teeth between her thoughts.

"Thank you," Peeta stared straight ahead.

"Ever do any commission work?" Johanna asked. "You know, paint someone for money?"

"Can't say that I do." The battery in Katniss' suit was slowly dying but Peeta's was still going strong and Johanna's body was changing colors along with it. Peeta looked up to see what floor they were on. 'Three? We're stopping at three? Crap! She's going to kill me. Johanna, stop talking to me or my wife is going to kill me.'

"You know Peeta," Johanna lowered her voice down. "I normally don't get into art, but yours was to die for."

'Literally,' Katniss thought to herself. 'He painted the Games.'

"Thanks," Peeta stepped to the side to let someone else off the elevator. 'What floor is this? What floor is this? Five. Come on seven,' his mind was racing as they made their way up two more floors.

"Well, this is my floor." Johanna stepped directly in front of Peeta and placed both hands on her hips. "If you're ever in the market for a new work of art, I'm available...for the next few days at least." She turned and walked away.

Peeta tried not to laugh. He tried to hold it in, but he could feel Katniss' anger bubbling up next to him and they still had five more flights to go and three more passengers to drop off. 'This is the longest elevator ride in history,' he thought to himself.

The second the doors closed behind Chaff and Seeder on the eleventh floor Katniss threw his hand to the side and Peeta busted into laughter.

"What so damn funny?" Katniss stepped off the elevator and accosted him. "You think Johanna Mason's glowing breasts were humorous?"

"I...I didn't say that," Peeta said between his laughter.

"Then what?" Katniss yelled.

"It's you, Katniss." Peeta shook his head and let out a little breath.

"Don't you see? Why everyone is acting this way around you? Finnick with his sugar cubes...Chaff kissing you...Johanna and her...glowing breasts?" He clenched his lips together trying to hide his smile at the thought and said, "They're messing with you because they think you're...you know." He really didn't know how to say it without making her even angrier.

"No, I don't know. Enlighten me."

"Okay," he held her by the upper arms, which she stiffened. "These people only know what they've seen of you on television. Like...when I was half dead during the Games and I covered myself up...it was obvious I did that for you and when you pulled the sleeping bag over our heads just so you could kiss me..."

"Get to the point, Peeta," Katniss scowled at him.

"They think you're...pure."

"Pure? PURE!" Katniss arched a brow at him. "Oh really?"

Peeta let out a little chuckle and said, "I didn't say I thought that, I said they think you are and by Capitol standards...you are."

"I am not!" She threw his hands off of her arms. "Every time a camera is on us I'm practically ripping off your clothes!"

"No you're not, Katniss. Trust me. I know the difference between the Katniss with and without a camera on and they're two different women. Actually one is a woman... the other's more of a girl," he teased. Peeta immediately knew he had crossed the line by her reaction. "Katniss, I'm just teasing you."

"No, you're laughing at me!" She pointed towards the elevator. "I can expect that from them, but you?"

"Katniss, I'm sorry," Peeta stepped closer to her. "I was just playing around." He saw her bottom lip begin to tremble and wondered what was going on with her tonight. She was going from hot to cold faster than normal. "Katniss, come on...you know I was only kidding around. I didn't mean anything." He tried taking her in a hug but she pulled away from him.

"No, Peeta." She was furious with him...with pretty much everyone, but she had no clue why she was on the verge of tears and when Haymitch and Effie entered the suite all she wanted to do was run and hide however the look on Haymitch's face stopped her. She wasn't sure if she had done something wrong or not. Maybe they had heard her and Peeta fighting and it was ruining the whole, star-crossed lovers' thing. Just as she was about to say something to Haymitch about it she saw the color drain from Peeta's face.

"Looks like we've got a matched set this year," Effie said of pair of redheaded Avox standing side by side next to Katniss' bedroom door.

The female Avox was the same girl that had taken care of Katniss the year before and a welcomed sight to her. Katniss had almost felt like she had a friend in the Capitol, someone that wouldn't judge her like everyone else had been doing that day, but then she took notice of the boy. Saw what Effie had meant when she referred to having a "matched set." The male Avox had red hair too and his face was all

too familiar as was the sound of his easy going laugh, which she knew she'd never hear again. Katniss could see Darius' body lying face down in the bloody snow next to Gale's whipped body. The Peacekeeper that had tried to aide her friend was now her mute servant.

Peeta stood staring at Darius and felt his knees getting weak. He reached out for the closest thing to him and felt Haymitch's hand around his waist. It was a familiar feeling. One that brought him back to the age of fourteen.

*Peeta kept glancing at the clock above the teacher's head. It was the last day of school which meant it was the last time he got to watch Katniss walk home. All the kids loved summer, he hated it. He rarely saw Katniss during the summer and it sucked as far as he was concerned. He got to work in a hot bakery around broiling ovens and listen to his mother complain all the time. Summer couldn't end soon enough as far as Peeta was concerned. Autumn was his favorite time of year. The leaves changed colors and school was back in session. The sound of the school bell had all the kids running from their desks and out the door, but Katniss never ran; she never looked like she was in a hurry. When she did run during track she was fast, really fast. Peeta used to stand alongside of the large field, a combination of weeds and dirt, that the school used for physical fitness and silently cheer her on, but she never knew. Peeta's locker was emptied out, he had done it earlier in the day, and he was ready to keep a safe distance away from Katniss as she headed home. It was Tuesday so Prim would be walking home with her friend, she always did on Tuesdays and Thursdays. As Peeta walked behind Katniss he tried to remember as much as he could about her to last him all summer long. The length of her hair, the shape of her body, there wasn't really much to it, was kind of straight, but he didn't care, the way she walked, the sway of her arms and when she arched her back to duck under the*

*fence he could've sworn she had seen him...smiled at him. He told himself he was crazy. There was no way Katniss Everdeen would ever pay attention to him let alone smile at him. He was walking to the bakery when he ran smack into the Peacekeepers. Both of them. He knocked one down flat on his back and the other grabbed hold of Peeta by the arm, ready to punish him.*

*The one that had fallen got up and said, "I've got this. Probably from the Seam."*

*Peeta was scared out of his wits. He had never had a problem with a Peacekeeper before and if his mother found out, he was sure to get a beating. "No sir, I'm from town. Sorry for bumping into you. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."*

*"Go on, Zachary. I'll take care of this kid," the Peacekeeper said. He waited until the other had walked away then dropped Peeta's arm. "You're from town, kid?" His voice was gentler now. "You're a merchant's kid?"*

*"Yeah," Peeta wasn't sure what was going on so he asked. "Am I in trouble?"*

*The Peacekeeper looked from side to side, put his arm around Peeta's waist and led him towards a bushy area hiding them from viewing eyes. "Normally you'd get a lashing for something like this but...if anyone asks, you got found guilty of negligent behavior in public, but since you're a juvenile, it's your first offense and you're from town you were let off with a warning, okay?"*

*"Okay." Peeta just stared at the guy. "Now what?"*

*The guard took off his helmet and shook out his red hair. "Go home...and watch where you're walking."*



Peeta had never spoken to Darius again after that day. He seriously doubted that the Peacekeeper would even remember the encounter they had shared so long ago considering the population of District Twelve, but Peeta remembered. He had never forgotten and now he never would.

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 17: Friends and Enemies, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Sixteen: Friends and Enemies**

**When we last left our team from D12 Effie was under cover and planted a camera in the escort's medical bay. In this chapter we see her plan come together and find out what an evil man Viggo really is and the hell Effie's been subjecting herself to for the lives of her kids. Katniss and Peeta had a little spat and got a new Avox. Their fellow tributes were giving Katniss some grief and the Tribute Parade was a big hit.**

**I want to thank all of you that have been following this story so closely. That read it. That review it. That email me... Some of you ask how I write so quickly. Well, your words of encouragement are a great source of inspiration. To my betas, S and A, there are no words to say how much I appreciate the two of you. A I forgot to say thank you in my notes for CF:R O so thank you for that! As far as this story goes... both of you have given me such great advice. Simple little suggestions that have really made a huge difference, so I say, all hail my betas!**

**If anyone would like a sneak peek into upcoming chapters feel free to follow me on tumblr at [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com) and now we shall enter the world of...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

The sight of Darius standing...waiting to be used as Katniss and Peeta's servant, as though he were no longer human, had her heading straight for her old bedroom. She walked into it, shut the door and immediately locked it behind her not wanting anyone, including Peeta to bother her. She stood for a moment anticipating Peeta's knock, which didn't come, then went into the bathroom to rid herself of the makeup that Cinna had applied earlier in the day. She stripped herself down and sat on the edge of her bed completely naked with

her head in her hands and tears flowing from her eyes. The past thirty-six hours had been a rollercoaster ride of events for her. The reaping, the nightmare, the Peacekeepers searching their train, the mysterious fire, her prep team's tears over her certain death in the arena, the Tribute Parade, the other victors tormenting her, Peeta...her husband teasing her...laughing at her and the final straw, Darius being turned into an Avox just for her benefit. Surely President Snow knew that Darius was the one that came to Gale's aide when Thread had whipped him. He may have even been aware of their long standing relationship in the Hob. She would've given anything to be in the woods at that very moment with her bow and arrows. To be able to shoot, walk free amongst the trees, along the lake, to do anything that would give her a sense of freedom.

"Katniss?" She heard Effie's knock at the door. "Dinner will be served in fifteen minutes."

Katniss didn't say a word; she simply stood up, got dressed in a simple shirt and pants then went out to dinner. She saw Peeta sitting on the sofa and wanted to curl up into his arms, but she was still so angry and he was the easiest person to take it out on. When he walked up to her and pulled out a chair at the dining room table for her to sit at, she had no choice but to accept it.

"The parade was a smashing success," Effie began talking about the wondrous costumes that Cinna and Portia had designed, but Katniss ignored everyone's comments. Occasionally she heard Peeta saying something, but she didn't know what and she didn't care.

Darius was standing to her right and Katniss saw this as an opportunity to get a second alone with him so she knocked a plate to the ground and went under the table to clean it up, knowing that Darius would be required to pick up after her. She met his eyes and

gripped his hand in hers, then dropped it the moment she felt Peeta's hands on her waist. "Come on, Katniss. Get up. You're upsetting Effie." Katniss couldn't care less if Effie was upset or not. This comment from Peeta further frustrated her and when they took their seats around the television for the Tribute Parade, Katniss made sure to squeeze herself between Haymitch and Cinna, completely avoiding her spouse.

She saw the looks Peeta was giving her during the recap of the parade, but chose to ignore them and concentrated on the viewing. She and Peeta were magnificent in the parade, not just because of their costumes, but their physiques stood out amongst the others as young, fit, healthy...everything a tribute should be. When Peeta made a comment about their costumes, Katniss understood why Cinna placed her pin where he did and announced, "I'm going to bed." Once again she went into her room and locked the door. This time there was a knock, but she ignored it.

"Katniss?" She heard Peeta's soft voice calling to her through the door quickly followed up by a twisting of the handle. "Please open this door up? We need to talk." It was silent for a minute then he knocked again. "Katniss, I'm not leaving until you open this door."

She let out a breath and unlocked it, opening it up a crack. "I don't want to talk to you tonight, Peeta. I want to be left alone. Go to bed."

"Katniss don't do this. Don't push me away."

"Go to bed, Peeta," she closed the door and locked it. He knocked several more times, but she pulled a pillow over her head and ignored his attempts at entering her room. When she woke up in the middle of the night screaming because of the nightmares, full of mutilated tongues, her arms automatically reached for Peeta only to find a bare spot on the bed and a pillow where his head should've been.

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Peeta watched as Katniss walked into her room after seeing Darius standing at her bedroom door. His instinct was to follow her, but when he did Haymitch stopped him. "You'll probably want to get cleaned up, kid. Don't think your clothes are in her room."

"Right," Peeta knew Haymitch was telling him to give Katniss some time to herself. He turned and walked to his room, stripped off his costume, turned on the shower and allowed it to rinse away the stress that had been building up. The buttons on the shower stared back at him as he chastised himself for teasing Katniss about the way the victors had been treating her. He should've known better after the past few days. Then there was this whole thing with Darius. 'Katniss,' Peeta thought to himself. 'I really need you right now.' He stepped out of the shower, dried off and put some clothes on. By the time he went into the living room it was almost dinner time so he asked Effie to call Katniss. He was sure she'd just stay in her room if someone didn't remind her to come out for dinner and she needed to eat.

Peeta wasn't sure what to say to her in front of everyone else, he really didn't want them to know that they had been fighting and he couldn't come right out and say anything about Darius. He looked at her as she stood next to the dining room table and wanted desperately to pull her into his arms. He was so tempted to just lift her up and carry her into her room, order a private dinner and say to hell with everyone else, but common sense stood in his way as well as his wife's temper. He pulled out Katniss chair and made do with her mere presence, taking comfort in each brush of her arm against his and the warmth of her skin radiating towards him.

Talk of the parade seemed to be the topic around the dinner table and every time a question was hurled towards Katniss, Peeta deflected it and answered it for her.

"People couldn't keep their eyes off of the two of you this year, Katniss." Effie said with a smile. "You must be thrilled with how well you did."

"We both are, Effie," Peeta answered for her when she didn't respond after a few seconds. The conversation continued on and when Portia asked Katniss what she thought of her fellow victor's costumes Peeta answered, "None of them compared to yours and Cinna's." The third time a question was asked and Peeta answered it for her the group finally stopped trying to draw her into their conversation. Everyone but Peeta ignored her until they heard the plate crashing to the ground and saw her ducking underneath the table to clear it up.

"Katniss!" Effie called after her. "That's not your job!"

Peeta saw Effie standing up, getting ready to round the table, but he stood and said, "I've got her, Effie." He bent down and placed his hands on her waist. "Come on, Katniss. Get up. You're upsetting Effie." Peeta looked under the tablecloth and saw Darius as he began to clean up the peas that Katniss had spilled and swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. The rest of his meal was pushed around his plate as the thought of eating while a now tongue less Darius, was suffering, was too much to handle.

"Shall we watch the parade?" Effie stood up and headed to the sitting area followed by the rest of the group.

Peeta walked into the room and saw Katniss squishing herself between Cinna and Haymitch. He stared at her in disbelief. He wanted to scream at her, 'Are you serious? Don't you think this bothers me

too?' The sound of Caesar Flickerman's voice was grating on his nerves as he placed his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, but his sight wasn't focused on the television screen, it was aimed at the woman he needed and who was completely ignoring him. He closed his eyes and let his head fall, then turned his attention to the TV when they showed him and Katniss. There were yells and cheers, they did look great, but the one thing that Peeta noticed was how Katniss' pin and his locket were illuminated brighter than the rest of their costumes. "It looks like our hearts are glowing," Peeta said with a hint of sadness to his voice.

"That was the point," Portia told him.

"I'm going to bed," Katniss stood up and walked to her room.

Peeta sat for a second then said, "Guess I am too. Goodnight. Thanks again for doing such a great job everyone. Katniss and I really appreciate all the hard work you're putting into this." He stepped to her bedroom door and was about to twist the knob, but thought better of it and decided to knock. "Katniss?" He gently called to her. When she didn't answer he tried the handle which didn't budge. "Please open this door up? We need to talk." Peeta leaned his back against the door and waited, hoping she would eventually come to her senses. "Katniss, I'm not leaving until you open this door." He stepped away from the door when he heard the door unlock.

Katniss peeked out through a slight opening in the door. "I don't want to talk to you tonight, Peeta. I want to be left alone. Go to bed."

Peeta shook his head slowly from side to side. "Katniss don't do this. Don't push me away." They barely had any time left together and she was going to waste it.

"Go to bed, Peeta."

'Don't shut me out,' he thought to himself as she closed the door in his face. Peeta continued to knock on her door, refusing to give up hope. He had given up so much time with her during training for the Games back in Twelve and he didn't want to waste anymore of it. He slid his back down her locked bedroom door and stuck his legs out in front of him. He sat there staring straight ahead for over an hour. He listened as his team left the suite shortly after he collapsed to the ground and watched as their quarters got darker and darker. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the doorframe feeling his heart slowly shattering into little pieces. A warm pair of hands roused him from his nestled sleeping position against the door. Peeta opened his heavy eyelids to find Darius leaning over him, guiding him to his bedroom. He thought of the Peacekeeper that had given him a break so many years ago as Darius tucked him under the covers. Peeta gripped his hand and mouthed the words, "I'm sorry," to him. Darius squeezed Peeta's hand in return, gave him a slight nod of his head. Peeta spent the remainder of the night tossing and turning plagued with nightmares of Peacekeepers ripping Katniss from his arms and tearing out her tongue.

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"Somebody wanna tell me what the hell has been going on out here!" Haymitch had been holding in his temper long enough, so the moment the door closed behind him in their Capitol hideout he let loose.

Cinna stood back and said, "Calm down, Haymitch and we'll explain."

"Well, somebody better explain because right now I've got no clue what the hell is happening. I come to the Capitol and Effie's dating some...blue haired blow hole, the victors are treating Katniss like crap, our train got stopped and searched by Peacekeepers, everyone from



the Capitol is wearing our training suit design...what the hell is this thing anyway?" Haymitch walked over to the original sketch he saw hanging on the wall. "Holy..." the moment he studied the original drawing he knew what it was and who the original artist had been. "Peeta drew this didn't he?"

"We thought you'd have figured that out by now," Portia took a seat in one of the chairs and crossed her legs. "Where else would we have come up with a jabberjay?"

Haymitch ran his hand down his face, closed his eyes, and then opened them again very slowly. "Guess I knew...just didn't want to accept it."

"Accept what?" Cinna asked him.

"That I did this." Haymitch turned to them. "That I was the one that labeled those two kids." Haymitch took notice of the rebel's banner and said, "I put them in this position and now they're going to die because of it."

Cinna and Portia exchanged knowing looks. "Sit down, Haymitch," Portia said. "We've got a lot to tell you."

"Start with Effie," Haymitch sank into a chair.

"First," Cinna began, "I think we should tell you we've got a plan to rescue all of the tributes from the arena and..."

"What?" Haymitch's eyes flew to theirs. "Are you serious? Do they know that? How? When? Who..."

"Haymitch, you'll get your answers if you allow me to finish," Cinna interrupted him. "All of the tributes in the rebellion know with the

exception of Katniss and Peeta. The Capitol cut off our lifeline to you once the reading of the card took place, so no messages could go in or out of Twelve. The only person able to communicate with you was Effie and it was...is too dangerous for her to say or do anything of a personal nature with any of you.

"What the hell has that woman done?" Haymitch shook his head with concern.

"Amazing things," Portia reached out her hand and rubbed his knee. "She's the reason we're able to go through with this rescue mission."

"Effie?" Haymitch let out a little breath of air through his nostrils. "Doesn't surprise me." He leaned back in his chair, determined to take in as much information as possible and said, "Okay, tell me what she's gotten herself into."

"For starters," Cinna and Portia informed Haymitch of Effie's undercover operation and how she had found Viggo's computer room. They showed him the plan for breaking into Viggo's home, the destruction of his secret room then told him about Effie's plan to place the blame on the Capitol official.

"So, she's going to try and catch him on camera?" Haymitch asked.

"Don't kid yourself, Haymitch." Portia said with an air of confidence. "Effie doesn't try anything. She achieves."

"And how are we going to let Katniss and Peeta know about this? Damn, I wish we could've brought them here with us." There was no way tributes could leave the Training Center prior to the Games. Haymitch leaned forward in his chair. "They've got to know before they go into the arena or they're going to kill everyone in sight."

"Portia and I have taken care of that. We can't tell either one of them, the Capitol's surveillance is too sensitive, so I got a bit creative..." Cinna smiled as he told Haymitch how Peeta was going to receive the information about the escape plan. "We're not sure how he'll tell Katniss, but those two have always been able to communicate with one another in a way that no one else can understand."

"It's spooky," Portia grinned. "There are times when I see them moving their lips and I have no clue what they're saying, but they always seem to know what the other has said. Plutarch said that the Capitol brought in a lip reader for the Games, but even he has been having difficulty understanding them."

"Those two..." Haymitch gave his head a little shake. "Never did get how they talk to each other."

Cinna looked over his shoulder at her and furrowed his brow, "They seemed to be a bit...on edge this evening though."

"Yeah," Haymitch sighed. "I can probably shed a little light on that. Seems Snow is up to his old tricks again." This time it was Haymitch's turn to explain all that had been going on in District Twelve and who Darius was.

"Dear me, those poor kids must be going through hell right now," Portia's hand covered her heart. "As if they haven't been through enough already over the past year."

"We're going to get them out of there, Portia." Cinna rubbed her shoulder. "I know we will."

"In the meantime, I better make sure they don't kill off our allies," Haymitch slapped his hands against his knees and stood up. "Those kids are going to have to make friends out there...earn the respect of

the rebels. Peeta's already done that, but Katniss...I have a feeling they don't think too highly of her."

"They don't know her like we do," Portia said. "All they know is what she's portrayed as in front of the camera. Once they see the real Katniss...they'll love her."

"I don't want them to love her, Portia," Haymitch turned to her. "I want them to respect her."

Cinna and Portia spent another hour in the room updating Haymitch on the rebellion, their suspicions as to why the trains were rerouted to the Capitol and finalizing the escape plan for the arena.

"That's it." Haymitch looked around the room and said, "If this actually works, we'll all be in Thirteen soon."

Cinna gripped his arm and said, "Haymitch, we need to be realistic here. Not all of us will make it out alive. The important thing is to get Katniss and Peeta to safety."

"And Effie," Haymitch added. "Snow will torture the hell out of that woman if he finds out what she's done."

"I agree," Portia said. "She's really been an invaluable asset to this rebellion. You must make sure she gets to Thirteen."

"Don't worry, Portia." Haymitch said with determination in his voice. "There's no way I'm letting Effie Trinket down."

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"Open the damn door! Training starts in thirty minutes!" Haymitch pounded against Katniss' bedroom door. "Women," he said under his breath. "You want to tell me what the hell is up with her?" He glared at Peeta.

"Don't ask me," he answered. "She wouldn't let me in there last night. I was banished to my room."

"Great," Haymitch grimaced. "That's just what I need. You two at each other's throats."

Peeta wasn't in the mood for any of this. His head hurt, his eyes were stinging, his hand was bothering him even his foot was giving him grief today. He felt like the eighty year old tribute from District Four. "We're not going to be at each other's throats. We know how to act in public, so don't worry about it."

"Peeta?" Effie stood next to him holding a cup of coffee. "Would you like something hot to drink? Coffee or hot chocolate perhaps?"

Afraid that Darius would bring it to him Peeta answered, "No thank you, Effie."

"Are you feeling all right? You're looking a bit peaked this morning?"

"I'm fine, Effie. Thanks for asking," he tried to put his escort's mind at ease.

"Well, I went over the notes you gave to me on the train and they were excellent."

Peeta's eyes lifted to hers. "Did you see anything...peculiar?"

"Nothing I didn't understand," Effie smiled at him. "As a matter of fact, I added a few things to it. I shall bring it to you this evening when you're through with training."

"That would be great, Effie. Thanks," Peeta gave her a smile and fought the sigh of relief he wanted to let out. Effie had understood the message he had written to her within the notes about the victors. Suddenly Peeta's head felt better, his hand didn't bother him as much, his foot wasn't aching anymore, he was still tired, but that's what he got for sleeping against a doorframe for the majority of the night.

"You're late," Haymitch accosted Katniss the second she stepped into view.

"Sorry. I slept in after the mutilated tongue nightmares kept me up half the night," Katniss' attempt at sounding rude was thwarted by the catch in her throat.

Peeta looked at her and mouthed, "You okay?" he saw her nod, but it didn't make him feel any better knowing she had faced her nightmares alone.

"All right," Haymitch cleared his throat. "Never mind." He waved Peeta closer and said, "You kids have two jobs during training today." He looked back and forth between them saying, "One, remember...you're in love." He watched as they shared guilty glances and finished with, "Two, make some friends."

"No." There was no way Katniss was going to make friends with the people that tormented her yesterday. "I don't trust any of them, I can't stand them, and I'd rather it be just me and Peeta."

"That's what I thought at first too, Katniss, but..." Peeta started.

Haymitch interrupted him. "But the two of you won't be enough in the arena. You're going to need more allies this time around."

"Why?" Katniss could feel her temperature rising.

"Because you're at a distinct disadvantage. Your competitors have known each other for years. So who do you think they're going to target first?" Haymitch asked.

"US!" Katniss pulled away from him. "And nothing we do is going to change any old friendships so why should we bother?"

"Because you can fight," Haymitch tried to reason with her. "You're popular with the crowd. That alone will make you desirable allies, but only if you let them know you're willing to team up with them."

Katniss crossed her arms and said disgustingly, "So you want us in the Career pack this year?"

"Katniss," Peeta said gently. "That's been our strategy all along, hasn't it? To be Careers?"

"Look, sweetheart," Haymitch tried a different approach, "the Careers are generally agreed upon before the Games begin and Peeta barely got in with them last year."

"Don't remind me!" Katniss grit her teeth at the memory of Peeta being with the deadly group.

"It saved your lives, sweetheart."

"So, we're supposed to get in with Brutus and...and Finnick!" Katniss spit out.

Peeta knew how Katniss felt about Finnick so he tried to ease her mind. "Not necessarily. Everybody's a victor. We can make our own pack. Choose whoever we want. Seeder...Chaff..."

"Though Finnick's not to be ignored," Haymitch added. "Find someone to team up with who might be of some use to you. Remember, you're not in a ring full of trembling children anymore. These people are all experienced killers, no matter what shape they appear to be in."

Katniss dropped her hands to her sides and thought about Haymitch's words, "*They're all experienced killers.*" As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. He usually was when it came to the Games and it bugged the hell out of her. The gold bracelet dangling from his wrist engraved with flames and their training symbol caught her eye. The fact that he was willing to concede what he had been against, and wear something to make him look like part of their team, made her think that she should consider his request.

"I think it's time we head down," Effie stepped up to them.

"They can go on their own," Haymitch said to her.

"I'm their escort. It's my job to take them to..."

"Effie!" Haymitch snapped at her. "They're not children! They can ride the elevator by themselves!"

Effie pursed her lips and said, "Fine. I shall escort them to the elevator...if that's alright with you?" She glared at Haymitch.

Katniss and Peeta stepped into the elevator standing a few feet apart and heard Haymitch calling out to them as the doors closed, "You're in love!"



Peeta reached his hand out to her and felt her fingers threading through his. By the time they stepped off of the elevator and into the training room, they were standing inches apart and looked like the star-crossed lovers of District Twelve.

"Are we early?" Katniss looked around the room. Only two tributes were there. Enobaria, the female tribute from District Two who killed one tribute by ripping open his throat with her bare teeth and her district partner Brutus, both life-long Careers.

"I don't think so," Peeta answered. "Come on," he led her into the room.

Within minutes the training room was filled with a half a dozen of the tributes, the rest obviously had chosen not to show up and Atala, the woman who ran the training, started her yearly instruction on what was available to use within the room, not to fight with the other tributes and to make sure to utilize the survival stations.

"So," Peeta looked around the room. "Where to?" He asked Katniss.

Since they were supposed to make friends she thought it would be best if they didn't spend all of their time together, not to mention she really didn't know what to say to him. "Why don't we split up...meet some people?" She could see the hesitation in his eyes at her suggestion.

Peeta was certain that Katniss was still angry with him, but this wasn't the time or the place to get into it so he simply agreed to her request, "Sure, Katniss. Where are you going to go?"

"Don't know." She shrugged. "Tie some knots I guess."

Peeta peered around the room and said, "I'll go chuck some spears." He leaned in and placed a kiss on her cheek. "See you later."

"Okay," she fought the urge to watch him walk away and shuffled her feet in the opposite direction. The trainer at the knot tying station remembered Katniss from the year before and was impressed with her knowledge of snares that Gale had taught her. When he began teaching her more complicated knots, Katniss' fingers moved slowly over the rope, twisting and turning the ends in an attempt to follow the teacher's lead. The heat of Finnick's breath on her neck, the feel of his chest pressed against her back and his arms wrapped around hers as he took hold of her rope and finished her knot for her, caused her stomach to churn and she fought against punching him in his overly photogenic face. "Excuse me. I think it's time to move on." She could hear Finnick's laughter as she walked to the fire starting station.

Peeta threw spear after spear into the dummies alongside of Brutus and Chaff.

"Think I gave your girl there a bit of a shock last night," Chaff guffawed and nudged Peeta with the end of his partial arm.

"Katniss isn't used to other people...handling her," Peeta said. "To be honest, I'm not too thrilled with it either." He threw a spear which embedded itself between the dummy's eyes. His Career training back home had been paying off.

Chaff let out a laugh and said, "Point taken."

Peeta turned to the victor from District Eleven and gave him a friendly smile. "Good. So, you planning on watching me do this all day or are you going to show me what you've got?"

Brutus let out a laugh and said, "The kids got guts, Chaff. I'll give him that." He picked up a spear. "Let's show him our stuff."

Fires weren't as easy to start as Katniss thought they'd be. 'Peeta always makes this look so simple,' she thought. They were effortless with matches, but with a flint it took Katniss about an hour to get a fire going. Once it was lit she looked up with a huge smile, proud of her accomplishment, to find she had company. Two tributes from District Three were attempting to build a fire with matches, which they weren't very good at, and Katniss was tempted to walk away. She looked around the room and found Peeta standing in the middle of a circle of knife throwers. The camouflage station was occupied by the morphling addicts from District Six. An alcoholic from District Five was vomiting on the swords. Finnick and his tribute partner were occupying the archery station and Johanna Mason was oiling up her naked body for a wrestling lesson. Katniss' eyes quickly darted towards Peeta to make sure he wasn't staring at the greasy victor. She squinted at him and thought, 'That's right. You'll stay right there with those men and play with the knives if you know what's good for you.' She turned back to the pair that were still attempting to light a fire with matches and figured she might as well stay put. "Here try this," Katniss handed the woman some thin pieces of straw to place under the wood. "It should set fire to your kindling."

"Oh, thank you very..." the woman, Katniss recognize from the reaping, was named Wiress said.

"...much." The man was her tribute partner, named Beetee and finished her sentence for her without hesitation.

"Sure," Katniss bit back her smile. "I'm Katniss Everdeen." Though in the back of her mind she was saying, Mellark.

"Yes. We know. We saw you during..." Wiress said.

"...the Victory Tour. Your talent...dress designs...were quite lovely."  
Beetee finished.

Katniss quirked her brow at the odd pair and their strange way of finishing each others sentences. "Thank you. What do you two do?"

"Invent things," Beetee answered.

Katniss listened as they began talking about their various inventions feeling somewhat small at her fake talent of fashion design. She listened as they spoke about their factories and how productions were slowing down. Katniss' ears perked up she remembered her conversation with Bonnie and Twill. They had told her that the rebelling districts were intentionally slowing down production on products and saw it as an opportunity to get information about the rebellion. "So, a lot of orders from District Three were getting backed up?"

"Yes," Beetee turned to her. "Did you have any similar backups in Twelve?"

"No. We lost a couple of weeks when they brought in a new Head Peacekeeper and his crew, but nothing major to production. Two weeks of sitting around your house means two weeks of going hungry for most people."

"Yes...that's a shame," Beetee turned back to his work.

Katniss wondered if they knew anything about the fire she and Peeta had seen on their train ride to the Capitol. "So...how was your trip here? Any delays?"

"No," Wiress was concentrating on a pile of dry straw.

"Oh," Katniss wasn't sure how to get them talking again.

"Any delays with you?" Beetee asked automatically.

"Yes, as a matter of fact there was." Katniss picked up a few pieces of kindling and placed it under her log. "It was quite odd. We think there might have been a fire somewhere behind us...maybe in Eight." She waited a few seconds then said, "Our train had to be rerouted due to debris on the tracks."

"Hmmm..." Wiress finally lit her straw. "Several of the others had their trains rerouted..."

"...as well, due to debris. We made it straight in though." Beetee said.

"Look at that," Wiress lifted her eyes up towards the Head Gamemaker who was standing in the area designated for all of the Gamemakers to keep tabs on the tributes during their training.

"Yes, that's Plutarch Heavensbee," Katniss said. "He's been promoted."

"No, no. There by the corner of the table. You see you can just..."

"...just make it out," Beetee was squinting through his glasses.

Katniss studied what they were looking at, thinking they were mad and then she noticed the squiggly little waves distorting someone's glass of wine. "What is that?"

"A force field," Beetee answered. "I wonder what brought that on?"

Katniss lifted the corner of her mouth in a proud grin. "Me probably. Last year I shot an arrow at them during my private session." Beetee and Wiress turned to her with curious stares. "They provoked me,"

Katniss said in an easy going tone. "So, do all force fields have a spot like that?"

"Chink," Wiress gave her partial information.

"In the armor," Beetee finished up the statement. "Ideally it'd be invisible, wouldn't it?"

"LUNCH IS SERVED!" A voice boomed out over the loudspeaker.

"Shall we?" Beetee extended his arm out.

Peeta walked into the lunchroom looking around for Katniss, but he didn't see her.

"Come on, Peeta. Help us pull these tables together," Chaff called out to him.

"He's busy looking for his star-crossed lover," Johanna teased him.

"Yes I am, and I'd appreciate it if you would put your clothes back on so you don't get me in trouble with her again," Peeta grinned at a still naked Johanna.

Finnick looked at his friend and said, "We'd all appreciate it if you'd get dressed Johanna."

"What's wrong Finnick? Can't handle my melons?" She slid on her training uniform.

"Can anyone?" Brutus shouted from across the room.

"Has anybody seen Katniss?" Peeta asked.

"She was hanging out with Nuts and Volts," Johanna grabbed a tray and headed for the buffet of food.

Peeta nudged Chaff, "Nuts and Volts?"

"District Three. They're kind of..." he made a face and stuck his hand out in the air, "...out there if you know what I mean."

"Oh, but are they..." Peeta didn't know how to ask if they were part of the rebellion. "Can they be trusted?"

Chaff looked over his shoulder and said, "Looks like your girl trusts them." Then headed towards the food.

Peeta followed Katniss up to the buffet. "Hey," he put his hand on her shoulder. He had been having a really good morning, met some pretty good potentials as far as allies went and wasn't feeling as horrible as he had when the day started. "How's it going?"

"Good. Fine." Katniss knew her answers were short, but she didn't know how to act around him so she stuck with the second job that Haymitch assigned them, making friends. "I like the District Three victors. Wiress and Beetee."

"Really?" Peeta grinned at her. "They're something of a joke to the others."

Katniss turned away from him and started ladling out her stew. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"Johanna calls them Nuts and Volts," Peeta picked up a tray.

"Johanna," Katniss grit her teeth and said it again, "Johanna." She turned sharply towards Peeta. "What the hell is going on between you and Johanna Mason?"

"Whoa," Peeta held a hand up. "Where is that coming from?"

"Oh, please, like you didn't notice her oiling up her body before?"

"No, as a matter of fact I didn't." Peeta set his tray down. "I didn't notice that she was nude until I came in here and when I did I asked her to get dressed."

"Why? Because you couldn't control yourself?" Katniss turned around and started ladling the stew again, this time getting it all over her tray. "Shit!"

"No, because I knew it would bother you. Personally, I don't care one way or the other."

"Right," she let out a huff of air.

"What is with you?" Peeta turned her to face him. "One minute you're pissed at me, the next you're crying...now you're jealous?"

"I am not jealous," Katniss quietly lied.

Peeta set his tray down, took hers from her hand, placed it to the side and dragged her to a corner. "If you're not jealous then you're mad."

"I'm not mad."

"Really? Then why did I sleep alone last night, Katniss? Why wasn't I there when you had a nightmare? Tell me that?"

Katniss stared at the wall, turning her back away from the room full of competitors. "This isn't the time or the place for..."

"I've got news for you, we don't have much time left, so this *is* the time and this *is* the place. Now answer my question. If you're not mad at



me, then why did I sleep alone last night, Katniss?" Peeta's tone went from immediate to gentle. "I need to know."

"The past few days have been hard on me. I just needed some time..." Katniss wasn't sure what to say. She wanted to tell him everything that was going through her head, but she didn't know how without causing him pain.

Peeta gave her a curious look and said, "They've been hard on you? On you?" He nodded. "Okay. What about me, Katniss? Did you ever stop to think about that? I know you needed some time, but what about what I needed?" Peeta put his finger under her chin and turned her face to his. "Did you ever once stop and say to yourself, maybe Peeta needs me? Because I did, Katniss. I needed you last night and you weren't there. Instead I slept with my head against your door until Darius finally helped me to bed and when he did...well, lets just say you weren't the only one with nightmares." Peeta paused before saying, "It would've been nice if my..." he stopped himself before he called her his wife. "If you had been there for me, but you weren't and I'm sorry you were hurting, Katniss. I really am, but I was hurting too." He saw the tears building up in her eyes and knew the others would be questioning it. "We need to pull ourselves together. We can talk about this later if you want, but I think we've said enough for the time being."

Katniss nodded at him and blinked away her tears. "Okay." She took a few seconds then asked him, "You don't want Wiress and Beetee?"

"I didn't say that." Peeta rubbed her upper arms and said to her, "It can be just you and me, you know?"

"Yeah, I know, but maybe Haymitch is right. He usually is when it comes to the Games." Katniss flashed him a quick glare. "Don't you dare tell him I said that."

Peeta chuckled and said, "Wouldn't dream of it. Tell you what...how about; you have the final say when it comes to our allies? Right now, I'm leaning towards Chaff and Seeder."

"Chaff?" Katniss made a face as they headed back towards the buffet.

"Yes," Peeta smiled and picked up a fresh tray for her. "Come and eat with him...get to know him. I promise I won't let him kiss you again."

"You better not," Katniss held her bowl out while Peeta scooped some stew into it. "That's not lamb stew is it?"

"No," he smiled. "Effie told them not to serve it to you anymore."

"Good." Katniss followed Peeta to the large table loaded with victors and took a seat between him and Seeder. Unfortunately Johanna was directly across from her. Fortunately she was clothed.

"So, Katniss...what'd you talk about with Nuts and Volts?" Johanna asked.

"I don't know anyone by that name," Katniss ate her stew with her head down.

"Johanna," Peeta tried to distract her attention. "I'm a fan of your district's bread."

"Our bread?" Johanna laughed, "Who can blame you...I've got excellent buns."

The entire table busted out laughing and Katniss threw darts at Johanna with her eyes.

"I walked right into that one," Peeta chuckled, playing it off for the room. "Seriously though...I'm a bit of a bread connoisseur."

"Why?" Johanna asked him.

"He's a baker," Finnick answered.

"No he's not," Katniss snapped. "He's an artist that bakes."

Peeta turned to her and smiled. "Thank you, Katniss." He faced straight ahead and said, "I've been baking my whole life, so... different types of breads kind of fascinate me. The fact that District Seven puts maple syrup in their bread...gotta like that."

"Are your parents bakers, Peeta?" Seeder asked.

"Yes," Peeta wiped at his mouth with his napkin then placed it in his lap. "They own the bakery in our district. It belonged to my father's grandfather, then got passed down to my grandfather, then my dad."

"What's your father's name?" Seeder asked.

"Bing," Peeta answered.

Johanna let out a roar of laughter. "Bing? Bing!" She sputtered. "Like the cherry?"

Peeta tried not to glare at her. "No. Like the bread."

"Bread? He was named after bread?" Johanna's laughter got even louder. "Oh...oh my God...Peeta...Peeta! I get it! Pita bread!"

Katniss threw her napkin down on her plate and Peeta grabbed her hand under the table. "Yes, Johanna, I was named after bread too, but I got off easy."

She snorted. "How is Peeta getting off easy?"

He smiled and looked around the table, "My brother's name is spelled, W-H-Y-T-T-E, but it's pronounced white."

The entire table exchanged looks with one another and then Johanna leaned back in her chair and let out a huge bellow of laughter. "Sweet Jesus! I can't breathe!" She clutched her stomach as the rest of the table, except Katniss joined in on the laughter, including Peeta.

"Told you, I got off easy." Peeta said through a good natured smile. He turned to Katniss, who looked like she was ready to kill everyone in the room, and whispered, "Lighten up. It's all in fun."

Katniss was absolutely furious. She couldn't believe that Peeta was allowing these people to sit around and mock his family, that he was provoking it...encouraging their laughter. She had to wonder if he had made fun of her during the day when her back was turned. All the times she heard his laugh, saw him smiling with the other victors, was Peeta having the time of his life at her expense? "I'm full." Katniss stood up from the table and walked back into the training room. She went from station to station attempting to meet the others, to make contacts for inside of the arena, but she was growing weary of pretending to be something she wasn't. Toward the end of the day she went to another station and sat down next to an elderly woman from District Four only to be interrupted by Finnick. She was ready to make a run for it, but he only introduced her to Mags, the victor that volunteered from his district. Katniss found the woman to be quite helpful when it came to learning how to make fishhooks, more so than the actual trainer of the station and decided that she liked Mags and wouldn't mind if she was part of her alliance as well. She stood up thinking, 'Great, Haymitch is going to love this. I want an eighty year old and Nuts and Volts as my team for the arena. Some Career I am.'

Peeta stood to the side of the training center with Finnick watching as Katniss wandered around the room. "She seems to like Mags," he said to Finnick.

"Mags is an easy person to like." Finnick stood silently for a moment then asked, "Is everything okay with her? She seemed a bit tense during lunch."

"Finnick, we're in training for the Games again...of course she's tense." Peeta noticed Katniss walking up to the archery station. "Hey, you want to see something amazing?" He nudged Finnick with his elbow. "Watch her." Peeta watched as Katniss took aim on her first standing target and hit it dead center. Then she hit another and another after that.

"She's pretty good at that," Finnick crossed his arms and stood back.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Peeta dug his locket out of his shirt and squeezed it thinking, 'Show them what you're made of, Katniss.' The archery trainer started to launch fake targets into the air one by one and Katniss shot each one down with ease.

Johanna walked up to Peeta and Finnick, "She's good."

Peeta didn't take his eyes off of Katniss. "She's superb." Not a sound could be heard amongst the room, even the Gamemakers sitting in their perch above the training center floor had stopped what they were doing to watch the shooting display that Katniss was putting on. The archery trainer set five fake birds at once into the air and one after another, Katniss shot them down. The echo of her target's bodies hit the floor within seconds of one another.

Peeta heard Johanna's soft, "Holy shit."

His entire being swelled with pride as he said softly, "That's my girl."

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Effie yawned and stretched, reaching her arms up in the air. She rolled over enjoying the warmth of the sun shining through the window, then she felt his arm wrap around her body. Her nostrils flared, her eyes opened, her shoulders stiffened and she remembered where she was and what she had to do today. She looked down at the chubby fingers on her waist, and gingerly lifted one of them up between her thumb and index finger in an attempt to remove the hand from her body. She slid out of the bed and onto the floor then ducked into the bathroom. 'Time to get a move on, Effie Trinket,' she silently told her reflection in the mirror. Her golden wig was sitting on its holder waiting to be placed on top of her head. Her clothes were hanging in the closet, her matching shoes, purse and gloves waiting to be donned. She was tempted to step into the shower, but feared that Viggo might join her, so she washed up in the bathroom sink, brushed her hair back and placed her wig on her head. By the time she walked out of the bathroom, Viggo was up and sitting at his own vanity.

"Good morning, darling," Viggo greeted her through his bright blue moustache.

"Morning, my dear," Effie beamed at him while placing her hands on his shoulders. "How are you feeling today?"

"Quite wonderful and you?"

"I'm feeling a bit..." Effie let her sentence trail off as she looked at Viggo's reflection. "Darling, have you been using that cream around your eyes?" Effie had substituted his wrinkle cream with the diluted

version of it. It looked the same, smelled the same, but had nowhere near the same effect. Needless to say, Viggo's wrinkles were quite prominent.

"Yes," he touched at the crow's feet around his eyes. "Though it doesn't seem to be doing a bit of good and I tried the other tubs in case one of them had expired."

Effie pursed her lips. "Perhaps you received a bad batch." She picked up his tub and said, "I'll check the lot number for you and make sure all of your containers aren't from the same one." Of course they were. "Darling what are you going to do? It's not like you can return them to the medical bay right now. With the Quell...the medical bays are extremely busy. It's a shame we don't have a spare tub lying around." Effie started towards the closet for her clothes.

It took Viggo all of ten seconds before he said, "Effie, dear?"

"Yes, darling," she called out to him.

"Don't you carry these in the escort's bay? You could go there and get one for me, couldn't you?"

Effie peeked out from behind the closet door, "Why I believe we do. I don't go there though...it...well...I'm afraid of..."

"What is it, Effie dear?" Viggo went to her.

"What if a Peacekeeper caught me going there? What would I say?" Effie played the cowardly woman very well.

"Would you feel better if I joined you?" Viggo asked her.

"Darling," Effie breathed out a sigh of relief. "Would you?" She had no clue why he had to join her considering it was his item they were going there to retrieve.

"Of course. Why don't we get dressed, and we can go there straight away."

"Excellent," Effie clapped her hands together. "We'll stop by and then I can go straight up to the twelfth floor to lead Katniss and Peeta to training...or to the elevator. That Haymitch won't even allow me to do my job. He's a baboon." Effie went into the walk-in closet and continued dressing. "Darling, I must say, I look forward to the day in which I can rid myself of the filth known as District Twelve once and for all." She cringed deep within as the words came out of her mouth.

The flitting sensation in Effie's stomach as she and Viggo walked into the escort's medical bay worsened. They made small talk as they went through the products in the medical bay, could she meet him later in the evening, the new fashion trends in the Capitol and when the talk moved to how convenient it was to have the medical products at hand she saw her opportunity. Effie had only one chance to do this, it was his life or her kids and there was no question in her mind who she would save. "Viggo, dear?" she asked him. "How long ago did you decide to start up this room for the escorts to use?" She knew he wasn't the one that started the room, but he was arrogant enough to take credit for it.

"Longer than you've been an escort, my dear." He searched through the products. "Where do they keep the cream?"

"I wouldn't know," Effie answered. "This is my first time here."

Viggo turned to her and said, "It surprises me that you don't rely on these supplies considering where your tributes come from. Then



again...District Twelve has never really been known for having fighters."

"No, that would be Districts One and Two...who, I believe utilize this room quite often." Effie tinkered around some shelves. Then added, "Honestly, I have a difficult time coming down here knowing that President Snow is unaware of it." Effie could feel Viggo's eyes piercing through her as he made his way over to her.

"Effie, my dear one." He ran his hand down her face and stepped dangerously close to her. "What President Snow doesn't know will not hurt him."

"All I'm saying is that one should honor their president. He is the leader of our country."

Effie could see the veins bulging in Viggo's forehead. "And what about the man you love? Should you not honor him?"

"Of course, dear, but the president is..."

"The president is an old fool!" There was spit collecting in the corners of Viggo's mouth as his words grew forceful. "That man is obsessed with those victors from your district. If he had just let them be, our country would be better off." He held his hand around her throat and gently squeezed it. "When I become president, this country will be a much greater place." His eyes were glazing over. "I will be a formidable leader."

"Viggo..." Effie began clawing at his hand. "I...can't...breathe."

He looked down into her eyes, lightening up his grip. "Effie, you don't doubt my decisions, do you?" She gave her head a little shake. He released his grip enough for her to speak.

"Please, Viggo. I won't have time to hide these bruises like the others." Effie stared him in the eyes.

"The others wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't continually questioned my authority." He let his hand fall to his side. "You don't believe I enjoy doing that to you, do you?"

She pulled her jacket down and straightened up her wig. "Of course not, dear. That would make you a barbarian."

Viggo twisted the end of his blue moustache and turned towards the shelves to continue looking for the wrinkle cream. "I think we both know I am far from barbarism."

Effie swallowed and ran her hand over her throat, threw a deadly glare at Viggo's back and said, "Whatever you say, Viggo." She pretended to search for his cream for an additional two minutes, then found it where it normally was. When they left the room, Effie swore to herself that she wouldn't spend another minute in his presence.

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The elevator ride up to the twelfth floor was awfully quiet, even for Katniss' taste. Peeta held onto her hand, but he kept his eyes straight ahead and didn't open his mouth until they entered their suite.

"That was some pretty good shooting you did today," Peeta walked towards the bar to get some juice. "Want something to drink? Grape juice?"

"Yes, please," Katniss answered. "And...thanks...for the compliment...and the juice." She felt like a complete idiot. Tripping over her words like a stupid kid.

"You're welcome." Peeta poured two glasses of juice and handed her one of them. "Want to sit?"

"Uh..." Katniss let her eyes wander around the room. "Sure...I guess." She watched as Peeta took a seat on the sofa and contemplated sitting next to him, but she wasn't sure if he'd want her to after the way she had been treating him. It wasn't until she had gone to the archery station and let herself get lost in the shooting that she finally realized how much of her bad mood she had been taking out on him. Now she was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Saying she was sorry seemed like the logical thing to do, but she didn't know how to do it. In a way, he had things he should be sorry for too and Katniss didn't think she should be the first one to apologize, but she didn't want to continue fighting with him either. "Um...I like Mags...from District Four. I can't understand a word she says, but I like her," Katniss twisted her glass around in her hands.

"Finnick said Mags is an easy person to like." Peeta sat back and put his arm across the top of the cushion. He really wanted to wrap it around Katniss, but he was so afraid to make a move. Saying he was sorry seemed like the sensible step, but she kept pushing him away and he just wasn't sure if he could take it anymore, so if this was all she could offer right now, he was going to take it. "Anyone else you like?"

"Not really." Katniss paused. "Well...Seeder, but not Chaff."

"Because he kissed you?" Peeta asked.

"Because he's rude," Katniss answered.

"Not really pertinent in the arena, Katniss."

She looked to the side and said, "Look, I don't like him, okay?"

"Okay," Peeta lifted his hand from the sofa cushion then put it back down. "Like I said earlier, you can decide on who's a part of our alliance...if we even have one."

The sound of the elevator doors opening up had them craning their heads around.

"Okay, you want to tell me what you did that half the mentors are coming up to me and asking me about aligning with you? I know it's not your sunny disposition," Haymitch walked right up to Katniss.

Peeta stood up with a big smile on his face and said, "They saw her shoot. I saw her shoot! For real...it was amazing!"

"You've seen me shoot before," Katniss couldn't help the curious smile that crossed her face when she saw Peeta's proud expression.

"No, I've seen you hunt, but not shoot like that...never like that. Every time we were in the woods we were..." he hemmed and hawed, "...otherwise occupied. You never really took me hunting."

"That's because you're too loud," Katniss blushed slightly.

"Lead foot," Peeta grinned. He sat down on the sofa right next to Katniss and said, "You were..." he blew a breath up towards the ceiling then looked down at her. "Katniss, I was so proud of you. That was a pretty amazing display of archery."

He had told her she was beautiful a million times, said that she had a lovely voice, paid her a ton of compliments, but this one had meant more to her than any other. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he smiled at her.

"You're that good?" Haymitch asked her.

"I'm okay, I guess," Katniss didn't know how to answer.

"So good that Brutus wants you?" Haymitch said.

Katniss stood up and smiled proudly. "Well, I don't want Brutus. I want Mags and District Three."

Peeta watched Haymitch's distorted expression as he said, "I'll tell everyone you're still deciding." Peeta had to hide his grin as his mentor continued to mumble his complaints and got himself a drink.

"I'm going to take a shower," Katniss grinned at Peeta and went into her room. He had no idea if it was an invitation, he seriously doubted it, but he took the opportunity to gather his clothes and move them into her room. He wasn't planning on spending another night alone.

Dinner that evening was a bit easier for both Katniss and Peeta. The conversation wasn't forced, the food was good and at the end of the meal, Effie gave Peeta his notebook back with a few things hidden between the pages. It wasn't until Haymitch said, "Why don't you two go to bed and leave the grown ups to talk," that things got a bit awkward between the pair.

Peeta shuffled his feet alongside of Katniss as they headed towards her bedroom. "Hope you don't mind, but I moved my stuff into your room while you were showering earlier," he said nervously.

Her stomach was churning as she answered. "No...I don't mind. I mean I saw your stuff and figured you'd be staying in there with me so..." She was chewing on her bottom lip like it was a piece of gum.

He stuck his hands in his pockets to keep from grabbing her hand because he didn't know if she wanted him to touch her.

"Okay...well..." He was drumming his fingers against his legs through his pants pockets.

Katniss opened up the bedroom door and stepped inside. "You want to use the bathroom first? Or I could...or..." She closed her eyes and let her shoulders droop.

"I'd like to clean up, if you don't mind." Peeta went to the dresser and took out a pair of pajamas. He took the pants into the bathroom with him and left the shirt on the bed for her to wear. She always wore his pajama shirt at home, but here...he just wasn't sure what she'd do. He walked into the bathroom, turned the shower on, looked at his reflection in the mirror and wondered who the hell was looking back at him. 'You're not five anymore,' he thought to himself. 'Take a shower, brush your teeth then kiss your wife goodnight. Stop acting like an idiot.' He told himself to stop behaving like a fool yet he was a nervous wreck when he stepped into the bedroom and saw her lying in bed. He crawled under the covers with the intention of telling her he was sorry and putting an end to their stupid argument, but the sound of her even breathing told him he'd have to wait. He leaned over, placed a soft kiss against her head and whispered, "Goodnight, Katniss."

Katniss woke up earlier than she wanted, saw Peeta sound asleep next to her and decided to head up to the roof for a little while. She had woken up twice during the night from nightmares, both times Peeta had held onto her and stroked her hair until she fell back to sleep, so she knew he must've been tired. She wondered how training would go that day considering their first day of training was a complete joke. 'Not completely,' she thought to herself. 'You got to meet some pretty interesting people and you got to show those victors what you could do with a bow and arrow. Plus you made Peeta really proud,'

she smiled when she thought of the compliment he gave to her in regards to her archery display. When she thought about it, she had to admit several people looked impressed, a few looked envious; some looked like they wanted to kill her. Katniss could hear the sound of the wind chimes tinkling behind her. She was sure it was time for breakfast so she headed down the stairs to meet up with Peeta and Haymitch.

"There she is," Haymitch was picking at a muffin. "You give anymore thought to who you'd like as allies in the arena with you?"

"I already told you who I liked," Katniss took a seat across from her mentor. "If you don't like them, that's not my problem."

"Geez," Haymitch turned to Peeta. "Will you talk some sense into her, kid."

"Katniss and I are in agreement as far as allies go, Haymitch. We like Mags, Beetee and Wiress. We'll talk to a few more people today and make our final decisions before training ends," Peeta picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it.

"Why'd you bother volunteering for me, kid? You're killing me! You both are!" Haymitch stood up and walked to the bar to thin out his glass of juice with some vodka.

"Thanks," Katniss mouthed to Peeta.

"Anytime," he mouthed back.

Their training day was a bit more laid back. Katniss felt as though she had actually earned the respect of the victors, even Finnick had stopped tormenting her. He gave her a lesson in knot tying and she gave him a lesson in archery. Johanna oiled her naked body up again

for the wrestling instructor, but Katniss paid her no mind. Instead she was painted into a field of yellow flowers at the camouflage station by Peeta with the help of the morphlings from District Six. At lunch, tables were once again pushed together.

"Peeta, grab that end and push," Brutus called to him from the end of a table.

"Want some help?" Katniss offered.

"I've got it," Peeta smiled up at her. "Why don't you grab a couple of chairs?"

"Okay," she walked over to a chair and tried to avoid Johanna's naked breasts staring at her.

The sound of metal scraping against the floor echoed through the room as the tables were being hauled around. "Hey, Johanna!" Finnick called out as he lifted a table up with no help. "Why don't you put your clothes back on? I'd hate to ask you to pass the salt and have you put someone's eye out with those things!" The sound of everyone's laughter reverberated through the room, including Katniss'.

By the end of training that day, both Katniss and Peeta were exhausted. They were greeted in their quarters by their entire team. Katniss was taken for measurements, adjustments would have to be made to her costume for the interview and Peeta was grilled by Haymitch about training. By the end of dinner they were both ready for bed, but Cinna pulled Peeta up to the roof for a talk and Katniss headed to bed alone. She fought to keep her eyes open, to wait for Peeta to come to bed, but the day's events had taken a toll on her and she was asleep within minutes of her head hitting the pillow.



Cinna stepped into the wind chime area of the roof and asked Peeta, "How are you and Katniss doing?"

"Good. We'd be better if we were at home, but..." he shrugged. "What can we do?"

"Fortunately for you two you have a brilliant stylist working for you," Cinna smiled at him.

Peeta returned his smile. "We have two brilliant stylists."

"This is true, but this year, I was the one that designed your costumes. All of them," Cinna put his hand on Peeta's arm. "Portia had nothing to do with them." His eyes bored through Peeta's.

It wasn't like Cinna to take the credit for Portia's work, so Peeta didn't question it when Cinna insisted that he was the one responsible for all of the creations they'd be wearing that year. "Thanks. Katniss and I appreciate all of your hard work."

When Peeta crawled into bed that night once again Katniss was fast asleep. He curled up behind her, wrapped his arm around her, kissed her head and whispered into her ear. "Goodnight, Katniss."

The scent of hot grain was making Katniss sick to her stomach. She sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands taking deep breaths.

"Katniss? Are you okay?" Peeta crouched in front of her.

"Yeah." She lifted her face to his. "That food smelled...it just smelled."

"Are you sick?" Peeta ran his hand over her forehead to check for a fever. "Maybe you should go to the medical bay?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. It's just...today."

"Oh." Peeta sat down next to her on the bed. "Private training session."

"Yup." She rested her head against his shoulder and felt his arm wrap around her waist. "I have no clue what I'm going to do in there."

"Me either, but we'll figure it out." Peeta rubbed her hip. "In the meantime. You've got to eat something. Why don't I bring you a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon or a muffin or something?"

"I'm not very hungry." She lifted her face to his.

"You have to eat, Katniss." He insisted.

"I guess I could eat some eggs."

Peeta stood up and headed for the door. "You want some bacon?" He turned to her.

"Sure." She leaned back on her hands. "And a muffin...and some fruit." Peeta started to walk away, but was stopped by the sound of her voice. "Can you bring me some juice too?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"And some potatoes?"

Peeta bit back his smile. "Anything else?"

"No...maybe some toast...with jam and a slice of ham, but that's it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." She made a weird face at him. "I told you...I'm not very hungry."

Peeta grinned at her and said, "Okay. I'll be right back."

The mood inside of the training room was similar to that of the lunch room the day before with the exception of the underlying tension no one spoke of.

"Anyone know what they're going to do out there today?" Chaff started off the conversation.

Cashmere, the female tribute from District One, answered, "The purpose of the private training session is to keep your skills a secret."

Johanna rolled her eyes at her and said, "Pull the stick out, Cashmere. I think we're past that."

A voice boomed over the loudspeaker calling out Cashmere's brother Gloss, the male tribute from District One.

Katniss watched him as he made his way out of the room without acknowledging his sister's presence and thought she could never do that to Prim. She'd be wishing Prim luck, hugging her...anything, but completely ignoring her...never.

"I know what I'm going to do," Cecelia, mother and tribute from District Eight said. "I'm going to tidy up that training room. It's a pigsty." Everyone started to laugh at her attempt to lighten the mood. "I'm not kidding. You men never pick up after yourselves. Swords...everywhere."

"That's not true," Katniss patted Peeta's arm. "Peeta's a great housekeeper. I'm the slob. He constantly has to pick up after me at home."

Peeta grinned at her. "I told you I'd make a better housewife than you." Neither one of them noticed the group of people exchanging curious looks with one another at their conversation.

"Cashmere..." The voice called for the other tribute from District One.

The room was eerily quiet until Johanna said, "Guess I'll just go ahead and ask what everyone here is wondering. You two live together or something?"

Katniss and Peeta just grinned at each other. Peeta answered, "Or something."

"So..." Finnick leaned his back against the wall. "What are you going to do out there Mags?"

"Ta a nab," she let out a hoarse sounding laugh.

"Could someone translate that for those of us that don't speak Mags?" Johanna said.

"She's going to take a nap," Peeta smiled. "I like that idea, Mags. Personally, I could use a nap."

Beetee pushed his glasses up on his nose and said, "The whole purpose is to surprise the Gamemakers so I think I shall try my hand at telling some jokes." The room was dead silent until Beetee said, "That was a joke." Then they all let out a roar of laughter.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do." Johanna stood up and walked around the room. "I'm going to do a striptease for them."

Katniss looked up at her and said with a straight face, "If you really want to surprise the Gamemakers, try keeping your clothes on. That should shock the hell out of them." Again the room laughed.

"Not bad, fireball," Johanna gave her an approving nod. "Not bad at all."

One by one the room emptied out until there was no one left but Katniss and Peeta.

"Peeta?" She stood up and sat across from him, took his hands in hers and looked him in the eyes.

"Yeah," there was a distinct hint of pain in his voice.

"Remember last year?"

Peeta pulled her hands to his lips and placed a kiss against them. "I remember feeling your finger against mine and drawing the strength I needed from that."

"I remember being scared out of my wits and missing you...you were right there with me and I missed you so much." She rested her forehead against his. "Things are so different this year and yet...so much has stayed the same." She closed her eyes. "I miss you."

"I miss you too." The underlying stress of the past few days had been building up between them and though they had been slowly getting back to normal neither one of them had brought up their spat after the Tribute Parade or Darius. Peeta was tempted to do it, but the training center wasn't the proper place for it so he just rested his head against her hands and took comfort in her closeness.

Katniss looked around the empty room that had been full of laughter only moments ago and said, "How are we supposed to kill these people, Peeta?"

"I don't know," there was heartbreak in his voice.

The thought of hurting any of her fellow tributes was unthinkable. "Why did Haymitch do this to us? Why did he want us to get to know them? We can't have them as allies. It'll be so much harder than the last time...except for Rue maybe, but...I could've never killed her." Katniss could feel the back of her throat closing up and the tears in her eyes threatening to spill. "She was too much like Prim."

Peeta lifted his eyes to Katniss' and said, "Her death was the most disgraceful, wasn't it?"

"None of them were very pretty." The vision of Cato's body shredded to a bloody pulp entered Katniss' mind and she forced the thought from her head. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure." He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. "Hey," his voice was soft and tender. "We can get through this, Katniss as long as we stick together. We're a team you and me...we always were."

She gave him a soft smile and nodded her head. "So what are you going to do out there?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Camouflage, maybe if those morphlings left me anything. They've been glued to that station since we started training. How about you?"

"Don't know, but I'll think of something. I'm pretty good under pressure."

"Peeta Mellark." The voice called his name over the loudspeaker.

They both let out deep breaths as they stood from their seats.

Peeta kissed her hand and said, "See you soon."

As he walked away Katniss called to him, "Peeta!" He turned to face her. She graced him with a big smile and said, "Shoot straight."

Peeta let out a little chuckle, feeling much of his tension dissipate and mouthed to her, "I love you Katniss Mellark." Then went to face the Gamemakers.

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With each footfall towards the training room Peeta felt an impending sense of dread looming over him. He kept thinking about Katniss' words to him, "shoot straight." It had made him feel better hearing her give him the advice he had given her the year before. He'd never shot a bow and arrow in his life, but he understood her meaning. She was clearly telling him to hit his target. Peeta walked into the room and headed straight for the camouflage station. It was a complete disaster. Thoughts of disguising himself, painting himself into some form of scenery crossed his mind, but that wasn't enough. He needed to really make an impression on these people. He lifted his head towards the ceiling and noticed the netting up above. Katniss had told him about Rue stealing Cato's knife the year before and how she had hid up in the nets. The thought of that tiny little girl pulling one over on the Career brought a smile to Peeta's face. 'Rue,' he thought. 'Your death...they should be held accountable for that.' Peeta glanced at the paints and let out a little chuckle. 'Nope,' he thought to himself. 'They're not going to be able to simply wash this away like they did

with her life.' He took some of the canisters of dyes, and paintbrushes and brought them to the center of the room, it took him several trips, but once he had what he needed he got to work. The flowers were first, bright yellow and white, light and airy with hints of green stems. The grass on which her body lay. Behind Peeta he could hear the Gamemakers boisterous conversations. They were talking amongst themselves as though he weren't even there and he was fine with that. He didn't even care if they started singing a drinking song again. They could even bring in a roasted pig. None of it mattered to him as long as they didn't stop him from his objective. To make the Capitol remember...accountable for the death of this small child, for all of the children they had sent into the arena over the years, for the people they were about to send into the arena again, but most of all, to make himself the target and save Katniss' life. He painted Rue's hair, soft dark brown curls around her creamy coffee colored skin, her hands holding a bouquet of flowers and the spear that had pierced her flesh, sending her to her death. He made sure to add the blood around her stomach, underneath the flowers as an added touch, so the Gamemakers knew that no amount of flowers could hide the tragedy that occurred within the arena that day. When Peeta was through, he stood back, looked at the portrait he had painted and thought, 'That's for you, Katniss.'

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She paced around the empty holding cell, that was the only thing she could think of calling the waiting area they held the tributes in prior to their private session with the Gamemakers, for almost forty-five minutes. Katniss had no clue what was taking Peeta so long. If he was doing some form of camouflage it would probably take him some time considering that stuff isn't easy to do, but she'd seen him whip through



things like that in minutes, so if he was taking this long she was fairly certain he was hiding his entire body, maybe painting himself into a field of flowers like he had done to her only the day before. She chewed at her lip, twisted the end of her shirt, tugged on the end of her braid and swallowed the enormous amount of saliva that continued to build up in her mouth over and over again. At one point she dozed off, but woke up when her chin dropped towards her chest. From that point on she began pacing around the room contemplating what she would do for her private session with the Gamemakers. She had one skill...two if you considered singing, but singing wouldn't save her life in the arena, and the Gamemakers already knew what she could do with a bow and arrow, so how could she leave a lasting impression on them this year? What could she do? Her mind began to race. 'You could throw knives. You're pretty good at that. Not as good as Clove, so you'd probably get a three if you're lucky. Okay, knives are a bad idea. You can climb...Rue got a seven for that, but you can't really be hopping around the training room roof. Um...You could...um...uh...'

"Katniss Everdeen."

'Mellark!' She closed her eyes and screamed her last name out in her head. "I'm getting really sick of that," she whispered as she headed for the training room. The scent of chemicals and cleaner smacked her in the face immediately. Her hand flew to her face, covering her nose and her mouth. She swallowed some air through her mouth, trying to clear the odor from her nostrils and noticed that one of the wrestling mats had been dragged to the center of the room in an obvious attempt to cover something. Katniss looked up at the Gamemakers and noticed how different they were from the year before. They weren't drunk and ogling a roasted pig. This year they looked upset...annoyed and she instantly knew that Peeta had done something to aggravate them. 'Oh, Peeta,' She thought to herself.

'Now what have you done?' Katniss continued to look at the Gamemakers hoping to catch Plutarch's eye, but he seemed to be intentionally ignoring her. 'Plutarch,' she thought. 'Help me out here. I need to save his life. Peeta's the one that deserves to live, not me.' She let out a little breath of air through her nose and thought, 'What good are you anyway? Look what happened to the last Head Gamemaker.' It was then that she realized what she was going to do. Katniss quirked a brow, walked towards one of the dummies that was used for target practice, stood on a chair and cut it down. It was heavier than she thought it would be, but she dragged it to the center of the room along with the chair. She got a length of rope and began fashioning a knot. 'Okay, Finnick showed you how to do this,' she thought. 'Make and S, loop, loop, loop, loop, loop, loop, coil, tighten...' She went through the process slowly, all the while her eyes continually darting up to the Gamemakers station noticing their impatience growing. 'Hurry up, Katniss,' her head was going a mile a minute. When she finished her noose, she wrapped it around her dummy's neck, threw the rope over the chin up bar and hoisted the dummy up until he was dangling. She secured it in place then went to find what would really make her training session a memorable one. The dark red berry juice sitting at the camouflage station was perfect. She stood in front of the dummy and painted the name, Seneca Crane across the dummy's body, thinking, 'You saved his life once during the Games Seneca, and I'm hoping you can save it again.'

# Catching Fire:

## Rekindling Chapter

# **18: Up on the Roof, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Seventeen: Up on the Roof**

**Previously, K/P had been going through some issues and finding it hard to reconnect. They had just completed their private training with the Gamemakers and were trying to decide whether or not to take on allies in the arena.**

**In this chapter we've got a lot of K/P fluff, but a bit of Prim and some of Johanna too. I love her!**

**Thanks to all of you for reading. I know my chapters are long. I've tried to write shorter ones. I really have, but I get a bit caught up in them...lost almost so I shall apologize for the length of my stories now. To my betas, YOU ARE AMAZING! Thank you so much for everything you do! The ideas and inspiration you provide... couldn't be done without you guys! All hail S and A! It's time to see what's going on with...**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

With the exception of an unfamiliar Avox, Katniss found the main part of their twelfth floor suite empty. Considering that she was anxious to share what she had done in her private training session with someone, this was a bit disheartening. The sound of her shower running was the first thing she heard when she entered her quarters, Peeta's uniform in a pile on the floor was the second. She picked it up and held it to her nose; the smell of chemicals mixed with his familiar scent filled her senses. Thoughts of them dying, worse yet, her living without him, entered her mind. It had been a constant fear since hearing the reading of the card, one she didn't want to face, so she gathered up her clothes and sought out shelter within the confines of the shower in Peeta's bathroom. An hour ago she had felt bold and strong, proud of her actions during her private training session with the Gamemakers. Now she was questioning whether or not she had made the right choice. Had she done the right thing? Did she actually help Peeta or did she make things worse for both of them? By dinner time she had worked herself up into a little frenzy.

"Hey," Peeta walked up to her, his hands were still stained from the dye he had used to paint Rue's picture on the training room floor. He had tried to scrub them clean, but nothing would take all of the colors off of his skin. "Sorry I took so long in the shower. I couldn't seem to get this stuff off." He held his hands out to Katniss.

"I'm assuming you did some sort of..."

"Let's sit down for dinner," Effie interrupted the pair's conversation and escorted them to the dining room table.

The nervous twitches in Peeta's stomach over his painting didn't start until he saw Katniss. He and Katniss may have been married, they may have gone through more than most people had in their entire lives, but there were times like these in which Peeta was reminded

how much of her childhood was stolen from her. The death of her father required her to become the provider, the head of her family, at a ridiculously young age. Hardening her and taking away the carefree spirit of her youth. Then she had let Peeta into her life and he saw glimpses of that young girl, the one that smiled, that laughed, the one that let herself enjoy life. He knew he was the reason for it, but the Capitol put an end to that. The arena stole what little spark of youthful freedom she had left. When Peeta saw Katniss' recently scrubbed face staring back at him before dinner, looking dewy and innocent, so fresh, young, and clean, and those damn freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. She looked as sweet and pure as Rue had, lying amongst the flowers. The veracity of his actions with the Gamemakers hit him like a ton of bricks.

"Okay," Haymitch spoke up the moment the soup was served. "Out with it. How'd the private training sessions go?"

There was no way on earth Katniss was starting off this conversation. She felt like a heel throwing Peeta to the wolves, but he had only done some camouflage so what was the harm? "You first," she said to him. "It must've been pretty spectacular considering I had to wait over forty minutes for you to finish."

Peeta cleared his throat and said, "Well...I sort of did the camouflage thing...not exactly camouflage. I mean...I used the dyes." He knew he was stalling, but how did he tell them what he had done?

Portia's forehead creased as she asked, "To do what?"

Katniss knew he used the floor as a canvas. "You painted a picture didn't you Peeta?" Guilt flooded her for suggesting he go first. She had forgotten about the stench of the cleansers and the wrestling mat until that point.

He turned to her and asked, "Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "No. They had it covered with a mat when I went in there."

Haymitch was slurping at his soup. "Not surprising. They're not going to let one tribute see what the other did...even if it is the two of you."

Effie put her hand to her throat and asked, "Did you paint a picture of Katniss? You did, didn't you Peeta?"

Katniss threw a look towards Effie and asked, "Why would he do that?" As though painting her picture was the most ridiculous thing on earth.

"He volunteered for the Games to keep you safe." Effie answered, her feathers were ruffled. "Everyone in the Capitol was expecting him to do something of the sort."

Peeta looked directly at Katniss and said, "Actually, I painted a picture of Rue. The way she looked after Katniss buried her in flowers."

A slight twinge of fear that he had made himself a bigger target went through her, but at this point she didn't think it mattered much anymore. There were explosions from the people around the table, but Katniss didn't hear them, all she heard was the beating of her heart as she fell even more in love with the man sitting next to her. She couldn't tear her eyes away from his as she mouthed the words to him, "You're amazing."

"I did it for you," he mouthed back.

"It was sweet," she mouthed.

"That's enough!" Haymitch screamed at them as his hand slammed against the table. They both turned to face their mentor. "Knock that shit off right now!" Haymitch blew out a breath in order to compose himself and said to Peeta. "You want to tell me what you thought you'd accomplish by doing something like that?"

"I don't know." Peeta shrugged. "Guess I wanted to hold them accountable for that little girl's death."

There were tears in Effie's eyes as she said, "This is absolutely dreadful. Peeta that sort of thinking is forbidden. Do you know the sort of trouble you're going to bring down on yourself and Katniss?"

Haymitch pointed his fork at Peeta, the anger from his voice was gone and replaced with distress, "Gonna have to agree with Effie on this one."

Katniss was tired of everyone giving Peeta so much grief so she decided she'd take some of the heat off her husband and put it on herself. "Guess this is a bad time to mention that I hung a dummy and painted Seneca Crane's name on it." She shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes in her mouth and continued eating like she and Peeta had done nothing wrong. As a matter of fact, as far as she was concerned, she was pretty proud of what they had done.

Peeta's stomach flipped over when he heard what Katniss had done during her private training session. His eyebrows raised, his lips quirked...he found that he actually wanted to laugh.

Cinna's jaw dropped as he said to Katniss, "You...hung...Seneca..."

"Crane." She finished the statement for him. "Yup. I was showing off my knot tying skills. My noose turned out quite well, if I do say so

myself." Another forkful of mashed potatoes. "These are really creamy."

Peeta leaned over to her and said, "The beef is spectacular."

"Mmmm, I know. So juicy, isn't it?" Katniss cut a piece off and ate it.

Effie lowered her voice down and stared at Katniss with a look of disbelief. "How do you even know about that?"

"Oh, was that a secret? President Snow didn't act like it was. In fact, he seemed eager for me to know." Katniss watched as Effie began to fluster. "Now, I've gone and upset Effie."

Peeta frowned at her. "You probably should've lied and said you shot some arrows."

Katniss tilted her head towards him, nodded her head and said, "Probably. Next time I'll know...oh wait...there won't be a next time."

"You would've thought we planned it ahead of time." Peeta gave her a soft grin and ran his hand down her braid.

"Didn't you?" Portia asked as she rubbed at her temples.

"No." Katniss placed her hand against Peeta's heart and gazed into his eyes. "Neither one of us knew what we were going to do when we walked into the training room."

Peeta's eyes roamed Katniss' face as he addressed his mentor. "By the way, Haymitch. We decided we don't want any allies in the arena. It's going to be just me and Katniss."

"Good!" he spat out. "Then I won't be responsible for getting any of my friends killed by your stupidity!"



"That's just what we were thinking," Katniss smiled into Peeta's eyes.

"You want some more roast beef?" Peeta asked her, but no one else heard his words, only Katniss. She answered with a nod and Peeta picked up his fork and fed it to her. Their meal was spent in silence, only the clinking of utensils against plates was heard, yet Katniss and Peeta exchanged words between themselves which drove Haymitch insane. She'd feed him from her plate, he'd feed her from his and by the end of the meal, their mentor wanted to hurl his own plate across the room.

"That was delicious." Katniss stood up from the table.

Peeta placed his arm around her shoulder and guided her into the sitting room. "Let's go get our training scores."

They sat on the sofa right next to each other, as they had the year before, and stared at one another not caring in the least what the other victors received. Not really caring what they got either. There was no changing the inevitable.

None of this should've been funny, but what choice did they have? Both of them were sick of crying, they were tired of wallowing in the depths of pity and sorrow, so laughter seemed to be the next logical step. "Have they ever given out a zero before?" Katniss asked. Peeta clamped his lips together to keep from smiling.

"No, but there's a first for everything," Haymitch replied with anger in his voice.

"We could make history," Peeta said softly in her ear.

When Caesar Flickerman said Peeta's name they finally turned their attention towards the television set. "From District Twelve. Peeta Mellark with a training score of...twelve."

The gasps from the District Twelve training team echoed through the room.

Caesar continued, "From District Twelve. Katniss Everdeen with a training score of...twelve."

Effie began to silently cry. Haymitch began to scream at them. Portia closed her eyes and started rubbing her temples again. Cinna just stared at the couple sitting on the sofa who were completely ignoring their training scores.

The feel of Peeta's hands cupping Katniss' cheeks filled her with a sense of security and love. Something she had been missing for days. Something she had needlessly thrown away out of sheer stupidity.

The heat radiating against his skin from the closeness of her lips made Peeta's heart swell. He felt like a fool for wasting what little time they had left together, and he refused to waste another minute. "We kids are going to bed and leaving you grown ups to talk." He wrapped his arms around Katniss' waist, picked her up and carried her towards their bedroom.

"Haymitch is yelling at you." Her arms were wrapped around his neck as her feet dangled off the ground.

"Haymitch is always yelling."

"Yes, but this time it's directed at you and not me."

"I'll alert the media." Peeta stopped at their bedroom. "Open the door, Katniss."

"Okay," she smiled as she twisted the handle. "He's really pissed."

"I don't care." Once they were inside Peeta slammed the door closed with his foot and fumbled behind him to lock the door. The laughter was suddenly gone. In its place was reality. He let her slide down till her feet touched the floor. "Katniss," his hands were running up and down her arms. "You know I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe in the arena, right?"

"Of course, I know that." She hated it, but she knew it.

"The thing is..." He didn't even want to voice his worries.

Katniss knew what he was thinking without even asking. "The thing is...there's a chance that no matter what we do out there, Snow's going to make sure neither one of us makes it out of there alive."

Peeta rested his forehead against hers and said, "It's crossed my mind."

"Mine too." She was so tired of dwelling on the possibility of dying. It had consumed their every waking...and sleeping moment for a year. Katniss closed her eyes, let out a cleansing breath and decided to forget about the future. "Peeta, I have a good idea," she paused. "Why don't you and I just enjoy what time we've got left? Let's forget about the arena...about training scores...about everything and focus on here and now."

"I like that idea...a lot."

"Good." She threaded her fingers through his hair and asked him. "So, what should we do with the rest of our days?"

There was only one thing that mattered to Peeta. "All I want to do is spend the rest of my life loving you."

Katniss lifted up on her toes, held her lips against his and whispered hoarsely, "Then what are you waiting for?" Her lips captured his in a long awaited kiss.

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Prim didn't hear the knock at their front door, but she heard the sound of voices floating to the top of the stairs as she was making her way down. She stopped mid-way and backed up, thinking better of interrupting the conversation between her mother and Peeta's dad.

"I don't understand. Why would he do such a thing?" Prim could hear her mom's question and wondered who the "he" was.

"Peeta wanted to make sure his girls were taken care of after he was...gone." There was silence. "Come on, Evelyn. Let's sit down." Prim listened to them walking towards the kitchen and went quietly down the stairs. She contemplated going into the kitchen but stopped short when she heard the baker continuing his dialogue with her mom. "Just so you know, I had no idea that Peeta made this purchase when I filed for my divorce. Peeta knew I was planning on filing for it though...just wasn't sure when I was going to do it." Prim's eyes grew huge when she heard the baker say he had filed for a divorce. She didn't know anyone that did that. It was so expensive.

"He intended on you and I running the shop together didn't he?" her mother asked.

"I'm fairly certain of it considering the supplies were delivered in my name to his house."

"Bing, I didn't even know you were staying there. How long have you..."

"I left home on Reaping Day. Promised Peeta I'd stop letting his mother push me around and you know Evelyn...when we were heading home..." Prim heard something slam against the table. "That woman said, 'well, we can kiss our monthly stipend goodbye.' Can you believe that? Her son had just boarded the train for the Games...we didn't even get to say goodbye to him and all she cared about was the damn money. I turned around, walked straight to the Justice Building and filed the paperwork for a divorce right then and there. She wanted to contest it, but I told her she could have the bakery if she signed the papers so it should go through fairly quickly."

"I'm so sorry." Prim could hear her mom crying. "How could she say such a thing about her own child? About...Peeta?"

"She's a cold hearted woman." There was a hush. "Tried talking to my other sons, telling them they could come with me, we could get a little house, start up a small business...Peeta gave me enough money without his mother knowing to start up five business if I wanted, but they won't leave the bakery. That woman has finally gotten to them too."

"Let's just hope they come to their senses sooner rather than later."

Prim wasn't sure what to do, if she should go back upstairs or if she should head into the kitchen to find out what was going on. Usually

when she walked in on the adults they stopped talking and pretended like nothing was wrong, so she decided to stay put for a little while longer.

"Well, what do you think about the shop? Think we can make a go of it?" Peeta's dad was asking her mom.

"Do you know anything about this type of business?"

"I remember some stuff from when we were younger. You taught me a lot when we were kids, but I'll admit, I'm going to need a lot of instructions. I'm not a healer. I've got good business sense though...and I'm good with my hands."

"He bought us the apothecary." Prim's jaw dropped. "That boy is unbelievable."

"Like I said, he wanted to make sure you and Prim were taken care of. There hasn't been an apothecary in Twelve since your parents closed up shop. That building's been sitting empty. Guess he thought it was time to put it back in use."

"And you become co-owner after the divorce is finalized?"

"Only if you approve. His stipulations were clear, if you don't approve, then I can start something on my own. Not sure what, but I can figure it out. Like I said, my boy made sure I was taken care of too."

"We have incredible children, don't we?" Prim could hear her mom's smile in her voice. "Katniss took all of her money and handed it over to me. She told me if Peeta came home to make sure to give him some, but he probably wouldn't take it anyway."

"Mom," Prim peeked her head around the corner.

"Primrose!" Her mother stood up from the table.

"Do you think she'll come home?" It occurred to Prim that Katniss and Peeta had prepared for their deaths. Any tribute that entered the Games went in with the assumption of not returning home, but both Katniss and Peeta came back last year and for some reason, Prim was certain that they'd come home again this year. She refused to accept that they'd both die out there, but after hearing what they had done...both of them making sure that their families were taken care of in case they didn't come home, the reality of their deaths was finally hitting Prim. "Will either one of them come back? I don't want them to die mom." The first tear fell down her cheek. "They can't die. They can't." She ran to her mother's open arms and bawled her eyes out. "Katniss finally...she fina..." Prim's heart was breaking. Her sister had finally let herself love someone; she had finally opened up her heart and let herself be happy. Now she was going to die.

"Shh." Evelyn ran her hand down Prim's hair and kissed the top of her head. Evelyn shared a sorrowful look across the table with Bing who reached out his hand. She took his and found a source of strength that she had been missing in her life for years. They sat that way for several long minutes. "Training scores come out in a few minutes. Why don't we go watch those and then we can eat the tea cakes Peeta sent to us?"

Prim nodded her head and wiped her eyes off on her sleeve. "Okay."

"Why don't you go wash your face up a bit, Prim and your mom and I will get the tea ready tonight?" Peeta's dad gave her a wink.

They took their usual seats around the television set and watched as Caesar Flickerman started the night off with verve. Announcing each district one by one and reading out the training scores for the tributes ranging from one through twelve. The brother and sister from District

One both received nines. Enobria from District Two got a nine as well, Brutus a ten. Both tributes from District three got threes. Finnick received a ten. Mags a one. The list went on and on until Caesar finally got to Peeta and Katniss and announced their twelve's.

Prim's tears came back full force and were joined by her mother's. Peeta's father dropped his head into his hands; he pressed his palms into his eyes and forced himself not to cry for the sake of his son's family. He poured three cups of tea, plated some of the tiny cakes and sat on the sofa next to Prim and Evelyn. "Katniss and Peeta are probably celebrating the highest training scores in the history of Panem right now, and I say we join them." He handed each one of them a plate. "Last year she scored an eleven, blew up the Careers' supplies, dodged the Gamemakers' fireballs, beat Cato, outran the mutts and made history by being one of two victors to return to home. Imagine what she'll do with a twelve."

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A deep, slow breath, eyelids fluttering open then closed, then open again, the light of morning filtering in through the window and the warmth of Katniss' body curled against his side. 'This is the best morning of my life,' Peeta thought to himself as he looked down to see her grinning up at him. "Good morning." He grinned back.

"Morning." She sighed.

"No nightmares." He ran his fingers through her hair and trailed them down her bare shoulder.

"Not one. What about you?"



"None." He stretched as Katniss inched her way up his torso lining her face up with his. "That was a good night's sleep."

"That was a good night...period." She pressed her lips gently against his and holding them there for several long seconds.

"Mmmmm," Peeta gave his eyebrows a little wag. "And that...is a great way to wake up." His fingers were dancing up and down her spine as she continued pressing soft kisses against his jaw...cheek...nose...forehead... "You missed a spot," he said when she finally stopped.

"Where?" She asked. He pointed to his lips. "Isn't that where I started?"

"Stands to reason, if you started there, you should finish there," Peeta said logically.

Katniss gave her shoulder a shrug then pecked him on the lips. "There you go." She rolled off of him and onto her pillow.

"That's it!" He lifted himself up from his lying position.

"That's it." She pulled the blankets up to her chin.

"I don't think so," Peeta grinned as he began trailing kisses along her neck.

"Peeta Mellark, Effie Trinket is going to be knocking on that door any minute to call us in for breakfast, so I wouldn't start something you don't intend on finishing." She could feel his hands making their way under the blankets and reaching for her. "Stop it." She swatted at them and held back her smile. "I'm serious."

"I know you are." He gave her earlobe a little flick with his tongue. "You're so serious, Katniss." He tickled her ribs and felt her wiggle against the mattress.

"Knock it off." Her resolve was quickly waning as his lips made their way across her collarbone. "Will you stop doing...oooh, right there."

"Where?" He lifted up his head and looked in her eyes.

She pointed to the crook of her neck. "Here." There was no reason why she couldn't enjoy this for a few minutes more. The feel of his lips tickling her skin, dancing against her flesh sent shivers down her spine. All she wanted to do was capture a few more moments of this dreamlike world with Peeta before reality reared its ugly head.

"Damn." He let his head drop into her pillow at the sound of the knock on their door.

Katniss blew out a frustrated breath. "I knew it." She pushed Peeta off of her. "Get up," she grinned, "before Effie busts her buttons. It's a big, big, big day. Or maybe it's just a big, big day."

"Stop picking on Effie." He rolled his face towards her. "She hasn't done a thing to you, Katniss."

"I don't like being interrupted." She went to the dresser and took out a robe, put it on and opened the door expecting to see their escort standing there, but was surprised to see the redheaded Avox girl instead. "Oh, hello." The girl handed her two envelopes. "Thank you." The girl nodded and turned away. Katniss shut and locked the door then joined Peeta once again. "Guess it wasn't Effie."

"Now don't you feel stupid?" Peeta asked her with a superior look on his face.

"Not really." Katniss sat back against the pillows. "Give her time. I'm sure she'll do something to aggravate me."

Peeta rolled his eyes at her statement. "What's that?"

"I don't know." She held out one of the envelopes to him. "Open it up and see."

Peeta ripped his open and began to read aloud. "My Dearest Katniss and Peeta, in recent light of your performance on the Victory Tour I have decided that neither one of you is in need of further instruction for your interview with Caesar Flickerman. Please enjoy this time to yourselves. Sincerely, your escort, Effie Trinket." Peeta turned to Katniss and said sarcastically, "That's Effie for you. Always doing something to make you angry." Katniss gave him a much anticipated scowl. "What's yours say?" He asked her.

Katniss ripped the envelope in her hand open and read it out loud. "Take the day off. Haymitch."

They shared excited expressions and let out little bursts of laughter.

"We have the whole day to ourselves," Peeta said.

"I know," Katniss' voice was filled with anticipation. "What should we do?"

Peeta thought for a few seconds then he took the note from her hand and asked, "Katniss, will you please go on a date with me?"

"A date?"

"Yes. A date."

"Hmmmm," she gave him a teasing expression. "Truthfully, I've never really wanted to get involved with anyone, but...I heard a rumor that you're a pretty good kisser so...I guess so."

He bumped his shoulder against hers and said, "Who said I was going to kiss you?"

"You better!" She threw her leg over his lap and her arms around his neck. "I'm breaking all of my rules going out with you, so there better be something in it for me."

"Guess you're leaving me no alternative." He rested his hands on her waist and his head against hers. "So what would you like to do on our date?"

"It's not like we've got a lot of options, Peeta," she paused. "Too bad we can't go somewhere."

"Who said we can't." He placed a kiss against the tip of her nose. "Come on." He gave her a playful nudge. "Go get dressed."

"Why? Where are we going?"

"Just go get dressed." He urged her.

"Tell me where we're going," she insisted.

"You are the most impatient person in the world. Get up." He gave her thigh a little tap. "Get dressed."

She wrapped both legs around his waist. "Not until you tell me where we're going."

Peeta shook his head, threw his legs over the side of the bed, stood up with her still wrapped around him and walked her into the

bathroom. "Drop your legs." She shook her head. "I need to order our breakfast so drop your legs." Her feet hit the floor. "Tell me what you want to eat."

"Um...scrambled eggs, fruit, pancakes with that berry stuff and the cream and..."

"Katniss let me go get a piece of paper and a pen. I think I better write this down."

Within thirty minutes Peeta led her upstairs to the rooftop garden where he had their breakfast waiting for them. It was laid out on a blanket, alongside of it were a couple of pillows, an extra blanket, a pitcher of lemonade, a couple of glasses, his sketchpad, colored charcoals and a basket filled with fruits and cheeses.

"Peeta, this is amazing." She lifted her face to his. "I love it." The sound of the chimes tinkled softly in the background, the sun was warm, but not too hot and the day was all theirs. "This is perfect."

"I'm glad you approve." He led her to their waiting meal. "Now let's eat. I'm starving." They dug into their food, relishing each bite as though it could be their last. Katniss sharing her pancakes, Peeta sharing his French toast made with the District Seven bread until finally giving it to her because she liked it so much. When they were through, he piled up the plates and sat them outside of the door. "Our lunch will be brought up around one or so."

"You ordered lunch too?" She asked as she shoved a pillow under her head and lay back on the blanket.

"Yup. I'm planning on taking advantage of this entire day with my girl." He held his hand out to her, "Let's take a walk around the Capitol."

Katniss let out a little burst of laughter. "Oh, yeah. I can just see them allowing us to roam the streets freely."

"Come on," he put her arm through his and began walking around the outskirts of the roof, pointing things out as he went along. "Look over there. What color would you call that roof?"

"Pink."

"It's magenta."

"It's pink, Peeta," she said flatly.

"No." He paused slightly. "It's magenta." He turned to another building and pointed at it. "That's pink." Then back at the original roof. "That's magenta. See the difference?"

Katniss looked up at him and shook her head thinking, 'Here we go again.' "What difference? Other than one is a little brighter than the other. They're both pink."

"Okay." He held her by the shoulders and faced her towards the city. "How many different colors do you see out there?"

'This is stupid,' she thought to herself, but played along anyway. It was difficult getting past the glamorous buildings, the spectacular manmade waterfalls built for the residents of the Capitol in order to show their superiority over the districts. While the people of the nation were starving, living in shacks, some with barely a roof to call home, these people lived a life of comfort. Never wanting for a thing. She had trouble keeping track of her task so she lifted her finger, pointing as she counted out the different colors. "About ten."

Peeta let out a little laugh. "Ten! That's it? Katniss, even the slightest change in shades is what makes them so different...it makes them...unique. There are countless colors out there. So many..." He stood next to her and got that far off look in his eyes. "I could sit up here for years and never quite capture all of the shades that surround us. The brilliance of the blues, the sparkling gold...the way the sun hits the crystals of the buildings or shimmers off of the water." He turned to face her. "It's breathtaking."

Once again he had done the impossible, he had made her forget where they were and focus on the simple joy of being. She gazed into his eyes and said to him, "You would think I'd be used to this by now...the way you see things...the way you can make me look past all the greed and see beauty. It's kind of amazing seeing the world through your eyes...even if it's only for a few seconds."

"Seeing the world through your eyes has been pretty good for me too, you know?" He took her hand and continued on their walk.

As the morning progressed they talked about their days in school, things they liked, things they hated. Katniss hated pretty much everything but lunch time with Peeta. Peeta hated summer breaks when he couldn't see Katniss. They spoke of their friends back home, but never their families. They snacked on fruit and cheese and drank lemonade.

"Catch!" Katniss called out as she threw an apple into the force field that prevented the tributes from jumping off of the roof.

"Catch wha...OUCH!" Unfortunately Peeta wasn't quick enough and the apple hit him in the head.

"Told you to catch it." Her face was deadpan and unapologetic.

He lifted his eyes to the sky and let out a sigh. "Your overwhelming sense of compassion is heart wrenching...really." He had to hold back his laughter when he saw her scowl at him. "Alright. Your turn. Catch." He gave her fair warning before hurling the apple back into the force field. They tossed it back and forth, laughed when one of them would miss it and have to chase it across the roof, and finally called it quits when the apple started to shred. When lunch arrived they made a picnic of it in the middle of the wind chime garden, enjoying the sounds of the musical landscape. When they were through, Peeta put their plates outside of the door and moved the rest of their belongings to the blanketed area.

He threw a pillow down to the ground and said to Katniss with a very loving tone in his voice, "Here you go, sweetheart. Why don't you take a nap? You look tired."

"Don't call me sweetheart. I hate that." She glared up at him.

"Why not?" He set the rest of their stuff down. "Haymitch calls you that and you never get mad at him."

"That's Haymitch." Katniss tucked the pillow under her head and stretched out on the blanket. "I hate pet names."

Peeta's brows rose. "Everyone has a pet name for you! Your mom calls you sweetie. Cinna calls you wretched girl. This whole nation calls you, girl on fire. Hell, even Gale has a pet name for you." He scooted close to her so she could put her head in his lap.

Katniss used his thigh as her pillow and faced sideways. "Catnip isn't really a pet name. That was more of a...mistake."



"You're going to have to explain that one to me." The sight of her hair flowing around his lap was so tempting. He began twirling it around his fingers, losing himself in the silkiness of the soft brown locks.

"What are you doing?" She grinned softly as she felt his fingers lulling her into an easy state.

He noticed she had some hanging vines in her hand and she was tying them together while she rested. "Practicing my knots." He trailed a finger down her cheek, and then continued playing with her hair. "Tell me a story, Katniss. Tell me why Gale calls you Catnip."

It wasn't like the Capitol didn't know she and Gale hunted in the woods. They had whipped him for it, still, she didn't want to give them anymore reason to punish her friend, so she left the hunting part out of her tale and told Peeta that when she introduced herself to Gale he hadn't heard her correctly and thought she had said her name was Catnip. It wasn't much of a story, but he got his answer. "And the reason I don't like it when you call me sweetheart is because you already have a pet name for me." She rolled over, faced him and cradled his cheek in her hand. "It's my favorite name by far."

He barely moved his lips when he said her name, the name he gave to her, but she understood him and they both smiled into the other's eyes.

She had wondered for quite some time, but never had the guts to ask him. As she looked up at him she thought, 'If you want to know, you better find out now.' She sat up and tucked herself between his legs with her back against his chest, put her little crown of vines to the side and leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Peeta, can you tell me a story now?"

"Sure." His voice was dreamy and content.

"Will you kiss me first?"

Peeta grinned softly, placed his finger under her chin and guided her lips to his. He placed a soft peck against her mouth and said, "Happy?"

Katniss shook her head. "I want a good kiss. The kind that makes my toes curl."

Peeta was more than happy to oblige. He started off slow. A meeting of lips, then a gentle exploration of her mouth, his hands caressing her face...her hair...her back. Her tiny whimpers echoed into his mouth. He wasn't sure if her toes were curling, but her legs were gradually shifting, wrapping around his own and he was fairly sure he had succeeded in giving her what she had wanted. As he pulled his lips away from hers he whispered to her, "How are those toes?"

"Curled," she answered.

"Should I go for clenched?"

She sighed against his chin and turned around. "No. I want my story."

The thought of a story was the furthest thing from his mind, but if she wanted one then who was he to argue. "Okay...one story...then clenched toes." He smiled when he felt her quietly chuckle. "So, what's the topic of my tale?"

Katniss began to pick at the end of her shirt, almost reconsidering, and then blurted it out. "How'd you learn to kiss like that?" She could feel him stiffen behind her.

"What?"

"I want to know. Where did you learn to kiss? I know I didn't teach you how. You must've learned from someone. So..." she let her implication hang in the air as she bit the corner of her lip.

"Katniss, why are you asking me this?" They had just made up and now she was bringing up a topic that was sure to start another fight.

"Don't you think I have the right to know?" She didn't understand why he was so hesitant. "You know about my other...boy." There had been only one. Suddenly it hit Katniss. She turned sharply to face Peeta. "How many girls have you kissed?"

"Katniss," Peeta put up his hands in defense of himself. "That's not the issue here."

"Oh my God!" She turned away. "That many, Peeta?"

"No." His eyebrows shot up and his head dropped back. He was digging himself into a hole and there was only one way to get himself out. "Look, I'll tell you, but...Katniss...you have to promise me you're not going to get mad at me."

She was already getting angry and he hadn't even said anything yet. Images of him with other girls, even an eight year old Delly was driving her crazy. She covered her head with her hands and said, "I shouldn't have asked. Why did I ask?"

Peeta pulled her hands off of her head and said tenderly, "I don't know, but you did and now it's going to be stuck between us until I answer you, so sit back," he pulled her against him, "and let me answer." He rested his chin on her shoulder and looked out over the sunlit garden. "I've kissed five girls."

"Well, I already know about Delly so..."

"Six," he corrected himself and felt her bristling in his arms. "Sorry. I don't think of Delly as a kiss, but you're right. I guess she was." He paused for a second and said, "I've kissed six girls. The first one was Delly, but you know about her already. Number two was..."

"What's her name, or don't you remember?"

"No, I remember, but I'm not giving you any names." He ran his hands up and down her arms which were crossed over her chest.

"Why not?" She snapped. "Are you afraid I might shoot them with an arrow if I get back to Twelve?" Peeta arched a brow at her. Katniss scowled and said, "Fine. No names."

"As I was saying...number two was when I was twelve. It was after my first reaping. I was sitting behind the bakery crying. The reality of Reaping Day had finally sunk into my little kid brain and I was really grateful that me and my brothers were safe, but two kids got taken away and I knew they weren't coming back. I had no idea who they were, but I felt bad for them...for their families and I started to cry. A girl I knew from school sat down and talked to me, kind of helped me through it and then she kissed me. It was pretty much everything a twelve year old kiss should be. Puckered lips and a lot of nervous jitters." Peeta thought back to that day and found the kiss itself to be a sweet memory from his past.

"Did you kiss her again?" Katniss let her hands drop and took one of Peeta's in her own.

"Nope, but we stayed friends. Then there was girl number three. I was thirteen and she was the first girl to ever shove her tongue in my mouth. It was a little weird." Peeta let out a bit of a laugh. "It was just lying there and all I kept thinking was, why is she sticking her tongue in my mouth?" He looked over at Katniss and saw her grinning. "That's

when I figured there must've been something wrong with her so no more kisses with that girl either." Peeta started playing with Katniss' fingers. "Then came girl number four. I was fourteen...no...fifteen. She didn't do it wrong." He felt Katniss' fingers clench and try to pull away, but he refused to let go. "She was the one that taught me how to kiss."

"Must've taken a lot of practice." Katniss spit out. "You're a pretty good kisser."

Peeta placed a kiss on her cheek and felt her pull away. "We didn't...practice that often. I'm just a quick learner. Besides, I ended things with her fairly quickly."

"Why? Needed to move onto your next conquest?" She had no clue why she was being so mean to him.

"Oh, yeah. I was a real lady killer." Peeta rolled his eyes. "Honestly, she wanted more than what I was willing to give. So I put an end to it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That means...she wanted me to be her boyfriend and I couldn't very well commit to one girl when I was in love with another, so...I told her I couldn't see her anymore and ended things."

"Oh." Katniss felt like a heel for thinking the worst of him. "Well, that was nice of you...not leading her on I mean."

"Thanks." He turned his lips towards her ear and whispered, "Can I kiss your cheek now?"

She couldn't help but grin. "Yes."

"Thank you." He placed a soft peck against her smiling face then took a deep breath. "Number five was..." The smile faded from Peeta's

face as he stared around the Capitol's rooftop garden. "Tiffany Mueller."

"I thought you weren't going to..." Katniss stopped speaking when she recalled who Tiffany Mueller was. "Peeta..." She ran a hand over his and waited for him to speak.

"I was friends with her twin brother Trip. He was reaped when we were fourteen. That family went through hell watching him die...those Careers tortured him and then she gets reaped the very next year." Peeta swallowed the lump that was in his throat. "I went to see her in the Justice Building before she left and you know what she said to me? She said the thing that bothered her most wasn't that she was going to die, but that she'd never know what it was like to fall in love or be kissed. So I..." He could picture pretty Tiffany Mueller with her blond hair all curled, her blue eyes, wearing a dress that was too big and wishing for something he already had. "I kissed her."

These were the reasons loving Peeta was as natural as breathing for Katniss. Her feelings of jealousy...anger towards any of the girls he had kissed prior to Tiffany, no longer existed. All she felt now was an overwhelming sense of love for the young boy that saw a girl in need and gave a little piece of himself to her so she wouldn't die with regrets.

Peeta cleared his throat and shook himself out of his stupor. "Then...uh...then there was girl number six." He let out a huge sigh and looked to the side. "She was a bit different then all the others."

"Different?" Katniss wondered. "How so?"

"Well..." Peeta hesitated. "I sort of had...feelings for her."

"Feelings?" This was an unexpected turn of events for Katniss.

"Yeah." Peeta turned to face her. "See...when I kissed her...the whole world kind of...faded away." He tucked her hair behind her ear. "In fact...every time I kiss her, my pulse quickens, my heart races...sometimes I'm afraid it's going to burst right out of my chest." He placed his forehead against hers. "Number six...she takes my breath away."

Katniss' felt like her insides were turning to jelly when she realized the Peeta was talking about her. "How often do I tell you I love you?"

"It's implied, every moment of every day."

She had never been very good with words, but a person of action. She lay down with her head upon the pillow and lifted her arms up to him, brought him down for a kiss and whispered, "Come here."

Peeta buried his face in her hair and whispered into her ear, "They're probably watching us right now."

"This would be a perfect time to have a sleeping bag to pull over our heads."

He smiled against her lips and said, "I brought an extra blanket." He looked around for it, grabbed it and threw it over them.

"Peeta Mellark," she said mimicking shock in her voice. "If the Capitol audience only knew how wicked you really were."

He waggled his eyebrows at her. "I save that side of me for you."

She pulled the blanket over their heads and within seconds her toes were clenching into tight little balls.

"Katniss. Katniss," she could hear Peeta's voice soft against her ear. "Wake up."

Her arms reached upwards above her head, stretching out the slightly stiffened muscles of her body. "Mmmm." She rolled her head from side to side.

"The sun is going to set soon. I didn't think you'd want to miss it." Peeta placed a kiss against her cheek. He wasn't sure how many more sunsets they'd be able to share together and he wanted to cherish each and every one of them with her.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the sky. "Thanks. I would've been upset if I had slept through it."

They walked to the edge of the roof, faced each other and wrapped their arms around the other's waist, looked at the sky and waited for the inevitable. The pink and orange hues mixed with a hint of yellow dipped slowly out of view as the sky grew darker and the moon got brighter.

Katniss could hear Peeta's sigh, see the sad expression plaguing his features. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...it's just..." He hated bringing up the Games. They had been doing such a good job keeping them out of their thoughts, but he needed to talk and she was the person he brought his problems to. "I keep thinking about the arena...both of them." Peeta looked off to the side. "I wonder if that little boy that cried after his first reaping...the young man that gave Tiffany her one and only kiss before she had to face death, would recognize me with all this blood on my hands." He looked at them as though he could see his fingers dripping in the thick red substance then took hold of Katniss again. "I keep telling myself I'm the same person I was before...before all of...this, but I'm not." He looked into Katniss' eyes. "I remember when we were in the cave and you told me about Rue, and I wished I had killed Marvel myself. I actually wished I had killed someone, and I did. I really did." He



paused. "But it's different this time...knowing the tributes and everything. What happens if I go out there and it's..." there was a catch in his voice, "...it's easy, Katniss? You saw the tributes in the parade, you saw us in training...our scores last night." He sounded defeated when he said, "We're the Careers this year. When the bloodbath starts, we're going to be in the center of it and there's nothing I can do to change that." Katniss could feel his whole body shaking as he told her, "Guess what I'm saying is...if I'm going to kill, I need to know that I still care, that if I'm going to die...I don't want them to change me. I don't want them to turn me into some kind of monster out there, Katniss." He looked at her. "Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense." Peeta didn't want the Capitol to turn him into what he had been training to be for months. He didn't want to be the person that killed for the sake of winning the Games. He didn't want to be a Career. "But Peeta, you know we are going to have to kill people again."

"I know." He resigned. "Doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

"We weren't happy about it the first time around either." She rested her head against his chest and listened to his heart.

"I ruined our date didn't I?" He kissed the top of her head. "I had to go and get all...morbid and depressing and now I've ruined our..."

"Stop it." Katniss placed her chin against his chest and looked up at him. "You didn't ruin a thing. You just need some cheering up."

"Oh, yeah?" He lifted his brows.

"Pig." She gave him a playful smack against his arm. "Besides I did that already and look at you...all mopey. Nope. I know exactly how to make you smile." She took a few steps back and looked up at the

moon. It had been awhile...a very long time since she sang it, she wasn't even sure if she could remember all of the words, but once she began they seemed to come back to her without even thinking. She had never really thought of the meaning of the words before, but today as she sang the song, the words had so much more meaning than when she was a child. When she was through singing Peeta's words shook her to the core. She hoped when she replied to him, she conveyed all that he meant to her as well. They were fairly sure that the Capitol had eyes on them the entire day, but what they didn't know was that another set of eyes had been on them at that very moment.

"Think they're going to call us for dinner?" He asked her.

"Hope not." She had been sitting with her chin on her knees and her arms wrapped around her legs for twenty minutes so Peeta could sketch her in the moonlight.

"Me too. If they haven't called us by the time I'm finished with this, I say we order some dinner and eat it up here. How about you?"

"Sounds perfect. I'm sick of making everyone around us cry."

"Effie," Peeta sighed. "Or Haymitch..." he lifted his eyes to her and dropped the subject. He continued his sketch of her, catching the moon's rays in her eyes and shining off her hair, the night's shadows across her face, hiding some of her features, highlighting many others. "Wish I could take this into the arena with me." He showed her the sketch. "Guess I'll have to give it to Haymitch for safe keeping."

"I like that one. You can't see my whole face."

"And you're not scowling." Peeta smiled. Katniss scowled. "Come on. Let's order some dinner."

They feasted on the rooftop, fed each other from their fingers, giggled uncontrollably over stupid things, sighed over many and were free with their kisses. The night air became cooler, the chimes grew louder and the moon brighter.

Peeta hated saying the words, but the day had finally come to an end. "It's late."

"Yeah. I know." Katniss looked around and asked, "Should we clean up?"

"We'll ask an attendant." Peeta picked up his sketchpad and the coals he got from Portia and left the remnants of their day scattered across the roof. "Let's go to bed."

Once tucked under the covers they faced each other, as they did most nights, to share their thoughts. Their faces were so close they could feel the fog of the other's breath against their skin, their legs intertwined, their hands trailing over paths of their bodies they had memorized over the past few months together. The dip of a hip, the ridges of a spine, the taught muscles of an abdomen, her long brown hair, his soft downy curls...

"Thank you for taking me on a date. It was wonderful," her voice was as soft as the skin he was caressing.

He could feel the love radiating between them, see it shimmering in her eyes, and feel it in her touch. "I wish I could freeze this moment in time, right here, right now, and live in it forever." He trailed one finger around the edge of her cheek.

"I'd like that." She knew where she was, lying in a room provided by the Capitol, having their every word listened to, but she didn't care. If she were given the choice, she'd choose to stay right there with him

for eternity. "Allowing this day to end makes me feel like I'm committing a crime." She gave him a tender smile then her face morphed into one of concern as thoughts of what the morning would bring entered her mind. She tucked her head under his chin and pulled him close to her. "Peeta. I don't want tomorrow to come."

He didn't either. "It's only the interviews, Katniss." But the interviews meant the end of their stay at the Capitol and then the start of the Games. "You'll do fine. Want me to help you with some questions?"

She shook her head and said, "That's not it. I'm sure I'll be okay with Caesar this year. At least I hope I will."

"You'll be great and if you get nervous beforehand all you have to do is what we always do when we need to summon up a little courage."

Katniss furrowed her brow and looked at him. "What's that?"

He gave her a knowing look and moved his lips, but no sound came out. "One." He ran her hair through his hand.

Her lips moved, "Two." She placed her hand over his heart.

"Three." Their lips met.

'Just like the berries,' Katniss thought to herself. Both of them had summoned up the courage to stand up against all odds, when their hearts ruled their actions and love mattered more than anything else. It was in that moment that they both knew their primary goal was to live and/or die the way they wanted, not the way the Gamemakers had intended and if they made the Capitol look like fools in the process, they didn't care one way or the other. That was the moment that changed everything. That was the moment when their act of bravery made a difference.

"Oh! Oh, my!" Octavia began crying the second she saw Katniss and Peeta sleeping in each other's arms.

"Stop it!" Venia turned to her prep team partner. "You remember what Cinna said."

Katniss and Peeta shot up in bed at the first sound of the whaling woman. Morning had come.

Katniss' hair was in complete disarray. Peeta's pajama shirt, which she was wearing, was hanging off of her shoulder, she wasn't sure what the horrible taste was in her mouth, but she was fairly certain something had crawled in there at some point during the night and died. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and turned to Peeta who looked as handsome as he did when he crawled into bed the night before.

"We forgot to lock the door," he said to her as he pulled the shirt up to cover her.

Katniss glared at her prep team, who were quietly bickering amongst themselves. "Yeah. Guess we have to get up now, huh?"

"You do. I'm sure my prep team won't show up for a couple more hours," he said with a grin. "Hey." He winced when he felt her elbow jab him in the ribs. "What was that for?"

"For being a man." Katniss sighed and stared at her pets, their bickering had turned into a quiet hum of conversation. 'Probably talking about how much work they'll have to do on me,' she thought to herself. "All right. Time to get up." She said it, but Peeta was already standing up and getting ready to leave the room.

He rubbed his eyes, gave his arms a stretch and looked at Katniss who was kneeling on the edge of her mattress. Peeta began to chuckle at the sight of her. "You're a wreck..." he cupped her cheeks in his hands and placed a kiss against her lips, "...and you've never looked more beautiful to me." He kissed her again, this time longer...harder. The next time he saw her would be at the interviews and after that... "I love you, Katniss." He held her so tightly he was afraid he might hurt her.

"I love you too." She dug her fingers into his shoulders and pulled him as close as possible. She could hear Octavia's cry from across the room, which further enhanced her own pain.

They pulled away, by tacit agreement and shared one last kiss. "I'll see you tonight," one of them said. "I'll see you tonight," the other repeated. Their days of living life for one another and pretending like the Games didn't exist were over. Now, it was time to dive back into reality.

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Johanna could hear the murmurs from her fellow tributes the moment they saw Katniss and Peeta coming into view dressed in their wedding attire. Katniss all in white, draped with pearls. Peeta wearing a striking black tuxedo.

"I can't believe Cinna put you in that thing," Finnick said to Katniss as she walked towards her place in line.

"He didn't have a choice! President Snow made him!" Katniss' retort was sharp and defensive.

"Well, you look ridiculous," Cashmere said to her.

Normally Johanna would've joined the tributes and ganged up on the girl, it was a bit much, but seeing her and Peeta dressed for a wedding they'd never get to experience, even if it was being put on by the Capitol, left Johanna feeling sorry for the duo. Especially after what she had seen the day before.

*"Leave me the hell alone!" Johanna yelled at whoever was knocking at her bedroom door. She was sick of it. Sick of all the crap that she had been dealing with. She was supposed to be preparing for her interview with Caesar Flickerman, but who the hell needed preparations? 'I sure as hell don't,' Johanna thought to herself. 'I'm a friggin' pro at this shit. But nooooo, I've got my damn escort hounding me for hours to practice how to behave.' Johanna began flipping off the closed door thinking, 'How's that for good behavior, bitchy?' She had tried to trash her bedroom, not that she really cared whether or not it was left in one piece for the Capitol, but her damn Avox kept cleaning the thing so she gave up on it. She didn't want the Avox to have to suffer anymore than she already had to. Her "mentor" she laughed when she thought about the guy that came along with them. 'Loser is more like it. What a waste of space. He's spent the entire time at the Capitol eating, sleeping and getting drunk. Did you expect something more from him, Johanna?' She asked herself. "For Christ sake!" She screamed at the door when the knock came again, this time she threw the door open. "What? What the hell do you want?"*

*Her escort was standing outside of the door with a proper smile on her face and a bright purple wig on. "Good evening, Johanna. We have wasted the entire day hiding in our room, haven't we?" She pushed her way into Johanna's bedroom.*

*"We haven't done a thing. I decided to spend my last day of freedom in my room. Got a problem with that?" Johanna followed her. "And I didn't invite you in here either. Isn't coming in here without my permission like...improper etiquette or something?"*

*"Under normal circumstances it would be considered quite ill mannered, however, considering our desperate need to cultivate your behavior in public..."*

*"Cultivate my behavior? What am I, a friggin' garden?" Johanna hated this woman. Hated everything she stood for. "Get out of my room. I'm not doing a damn thing with you, so you might as well leave now before I grab you by that purple bird's nest of yours and throw you out of here."*

*Her escort refused to budge. "Johanna, we cannot have a repeat performance of your reaping, dear."*

*"Ugh!" Johanna stormed out of her room; she looked to the left and saw Blight talking with someone, sharing a drink and a laugh, probably their mentor. Then she looked to her right and saw the door to the roof.*

*"Johanna I am speaking to you." Her escort followed her out the door and down the hall.*

*"Listen bitchy, I have no interest in anything you have to say!"*

*Her escort forced a smile and said, "For the last time, my name is Bitsy...Bitsy."*

*"Gee," Johanna stomped up to her escort and said, "Let me check my give a shit meter." She began rising and dropping her hand in the air as if measuring something and making a beeping noise then let the*



beep trail off. "Beeee...aaaaaw..." She got in her escort's face. "Looks like I don't give a shit...bitchy." She turned and went towards the exit.

"Where on earth do you think you're going?"

"Anywhere you're not!" Johanna yelled over her shoulder. The door to the roof slammed behind her. Johanna didn't bother to wait to hear the clicking of her escort's heels on the staircase behind her. There was no way on earth the woman would climb up steps, she might damage her shoes. No one really went to the rooftop this year since the surveillance had gotten pretty drastic up there. You couldn't spit without the Capitol knowing where it landed, but Johanna needed a break from her surroundings and she was trapped inside of the Tribute Center. Still in a bit of a rage, she twisted the knob to the roof and was about to throw it open until she heard a voice.

"Are you okay?" It was Katniss.

"Yeah...it's just...I keep thinking about the arena...both of them. I wonder if that little boy that cried after his first reaping...the young man that gave Tiffany her one and only kiss before she had to face death, would recognize me with all this blood on my hands." 'Who doesn't have blood on their hands,' Johanna thought to herself. "I keep telling myself I'm the same person I was before...before all of...this, but I'm not. I remember when we were in the cave and you told me about Rue, and I wished I had killed Marvel myself. I actually wished I had killed someone, and I did. I really did." 'I wish you had killed that little shit too,' Johanna thought. "But it's different this time...knowing the tributes and everything. What happens if I go out there and it's..." Johanna rolled her eyes and thought, 'You're not going to start crying are you? Shit, you're going to cry.' "...it's easy, Katniss? You saw the tributes in the parade, you saw us in training...our scores last night. We're the Careers this year. When the

*bloodbath starts, we're going to be in the center of it and there's nothing I can do to change that. Guess what I'm saying is...if I'm going to kill, I need to know that I still care, that if I'm going to die...I don't want them to change me. I don't want them to turn me into some kind of monster out there, Katniss." 'Too late,' Johanna thought. 'We're all monsters. You're a victor and victor equals monster.' "Does that make sense?"*

*"Perfect sense." Johanna could see the sadness crossing Katniss' face as she told him, "But Peeta, you know we are going to have to kill people again."*

*"I know. Doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."*

*"We weren't happy about it the first time around either." 'Who was?' Johanna thought to herself.*

*"I ruined our date didn't I?" 'You're on a date?' Johanna thought to herself. 'Weird place to go on a date.' "I had to go and get all...morbid and depressing and now I've ruined our..."*

*"Stop it. You didn't ruin a thing. You just need some cheering up." 'I know how you can cheer the boy up,' Johanna's mind instantly went to the gutter.*

*"Oh, yeah?" 'Great minds think alike, Peeta.' Johanna lifted the corner of her mouth in a cocky grin.*

*"Pig," Katniss said. 'Prude,' Johanna thought. "Besides I did that already and look at you...all mopey. 'Well, what do you know, fireball. Maybe you're not such a prude after all.' Johanna gave Katniss a nod of approval. "Nope. I know exactly how to make you smile."*

*Johanna opened the door a little bit more so she could see what Katniss was doing and why she was staring up at the sky. She didn't know what to expect, but when she heard Katniss start to sing, Johanna was taken by complete surprise.*

*Deep in the heart of the mountains*

*Streams flow crystal and clear*

*The trees ever green*

*The breeze fresh and clean*

*This is where my heart is dear*

*For I am home in the valley*

*The valley is home within me*

*Wherever I roam*

*I know I am home*

*As long as the valley's with me*

*The girl had a pretty voice. The song sounded like a basic school kid's song until it got to the second verse then the impact of the words hit Johanna like a knock in the head.*

*I've gone to a land unasked for*

*The waters flow rough and red*

*The birds do not sing*

*The cannons did ring*

*But I know where my heart is dear*

*For I will go home to the valley*

*The valley is waiting for me*

*Wherever I roam*

*I know I am home*

*As long as the valley's with me*

*The valley is always with me*

*Katniss stepped up to Peeta who was staring at her like he had seen her for the first time and asked him, "What are you staring at?"*

*"You." Peeta answered. "I didn't think it was possible, Katniss. I had no clue...no clue that I could fall in love with you all over again...but I just did." He cupped her face in his hands.*

*She closed her eyes and cupped his face in hers. "That's you, you know? You're my valley...my home. As long as you're with me...I'm home, Peeta."*

*Johanna was mesmerized by the pair. 'Is this what people had seen when they watched the Games?' She wondered. 'Something so innocent and pure in the midst of sheer evil.' Johanna closed the door as quietly as possible and tiptoed down the stairs making sure not to be heard.*

*As Katniss walked by Johanna, wearing her pearl covered wedding dress, Johanna thought about how cruel President Snow was to remind her of a day she'll never have by making her wear the white*

garment. She reached up, straightened out Katniss' pearl necklace and said, "Make him pay for it, okay?"

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"Would you mind giving us a moment?" Effie entered Katniss' bedroom with the redheaded Avox girl carrying a tray covered with a silver dome. "I have Katniss' breakfast and I'd like a few moments alone with her," she addressed Katniss' prep team. Once they were gone, she pointed to a small table and said to the Avox, "You may place the tray there and stand to the side please."

"What's for breakfast?" Katniss walked to the table.

"One moment." Effie stopped her, locked the door then motioned for Katniss to come and get her breakfast. The second Effie lifted the lid Katniss covered her nose and mouth and ran to the bathroom. "That's what I thought." Effie let out a bit of a sigh. "Here," she covered the tray back up and addressed the Avox. "Please remove this. Katniss will be needing a cup of chamomile tea in ten minutes and then you can take her breakfast order." Effie sat on Katniss bed and waited for her to exit the bathroom. "Feeling a bit under the weather, dear?" She patted the edge of the mattress.

"Stress," Katniss rubbed her temples.

"Yes, stress will do that to you." Effie reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a little foil packet and ripped it open revealing a tiny plastic square.

Katniss saw what her escort had in her hand and wondered what the hell she was thinking. "Effie?" Effie's finger immediately went to her

lips in a silencing motion and then she pricked Katniss' finger with the microscopic needle embedded in the plastic. Within seconds their eyes closed. Effie's fingers went to her throat and Katniss' jaw dropped.

"Well," Effie stood up, placed the piece of plastic back inside of the foil, dropped it onto the floor and crushed it with her foot. "I must use the restroom." She picked up the trash intending on flushing it. "And you should have some tea. It'll settle your nerves."

"Yeah...tea." Katniss stared into space. Tea was the last thing on her mind.

Octavia had never made it back into Katniss' room that day. Flavius had lasted up until the last hour, but even he was finding it difficult to hold back his tears. He silently laid his comb down and left the room without speaking a word to Katniss. It was Venia with the gold tattoos etched into her skin that dug deep and finished preparing Katniss for her interview with Caesar. It was when Cinna entered her room that Venia held Katniss' hands, finally finding the courage to look her in the eyes and said to her, "We would all like you to know what a...privilege it has been to make you look your best." With that she was gone.

'My prep team,' Katniss thought to herself. 'My foolish, shallow...affectionate pets. Even you know I won't be returning. Does the whole world know? Does Cinna?' She flashed her eyes to her stylist...her friend who showed no signs of sadness and felt relief. "So, what am I wearing tonight? Planning on making me light up the whole room?"

There was hesitation in Cinna's voice before he unzipped the garment bag. "President Snow put in the dress order himself." Cinna pulled out the pearl covered wedding dress that Katniss had worn while sitting in the rocking chair. "Even though they announced the Quarter Quell the

night of the photo shoot, people still voted for their favorite dress, and this was the winner. The president says you're to wear it tonight." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Our objections were ignored."

The silk garment stared at Katniss. President Snow meant for it to be a reminder of what she could never have, but he didn't know...he'd never know all that she had and more. She rubbed the material between her fingertips, remembering the moment Peeta walked into her mother's house while she sat in the rocking chair. She had felt so loved in that moment. The night they watched the results of the photo shoot, the look on Peeta's face when he saw her in the dress and his comment about wanting a copy of that picture. "It'd be a shame to waste such a pretty dress." Katniss lifted her face to Cinna and said warmly, "Besides, Peeta's going to love me in this."

They shared a knowing smile and Cinna said, "Time to get dressed you wretched woman."

"Hey, I got a promotion. From wretched girl to woman." Katniss stepped into the dress and followed Cinna's orders as he settled her into it. "Was it always this heavy?" She began to move her shoulders a little to try and relieve some of the weight she was feeling.

"You know I had to make alterations to the dress for you, but there was also an issue with the lighting so some changes had to be made." Cinna added the jewelry, the shoes, touched up her makeup then finally put on her veil. "What do you think?"

"You covered my freckles." Katniss stared blankly at herself in the mirror. "It's a good thing you made the rest of me look so pretty or Peeta would never forgive you for hiding those with makeup."

"You look ravishing." Cinna gave a little smile. "Now, Katniss, because your bodice is fitted, I don't want you raising your arms above your head...not until you twirl anyway."

"And will I be twirling?"

"Of course you will, my darling." Cinna began leading her towards the door. "If Caesar doesn't ask you to twirl, then you suggest it, but not until the very end...save it for your big finale." They began to walk down the hall and towards the elevator.

"You give me a signal so I know wh..." Her mouth had gone dry, her pulse began to race and her husband was standing with the rest of their team in front of the elevator doors wearing the all black tuxedo accentuated with white pearls. "Hi."

"Hi." He stared at her. "You look...wow."

"Come. Come." Effie ushered them onto the elevator. "You both look smashing, but we mustn't be late for the interviews."

Portia pulled Peeta to the side and began whispering something into his ear, but his eyes were latched onto Katniss'.

"We'll let them go in alone," Haymitch directed his comment towards Effie, who immediately bristled, but didn't argue. "Good luck, kids. You're gonna do great."

Peeta held out his hand. Katniss grabbed onto it as though it were a lifeline and they walked backstage. She heard the gasps, saw the stares. Were her fellow tributes envious? Were they filled with anger at how striking a pair she and Peeta made in their finery?



"I can't believe Cinna put you in that thing," Finnick's words were filled with disgust.

"He didn't have a choice! President Snow made him!" There was no way Katniss was going to let anyone insult Cinna.

"Well, you look ridiculous," Cashmere, with her flowing blond locks turned away from her as though the sight of Katniss in a wedding dress was repulsive.

It was Johanna Mason's act of kindness that threw Katniss for a loop. "Make him pay for it, okay?" Her fellow tribute reached up and straightened out her pearl necklace. Katniss had never received one kind word from Johanna, so this took her by complete surprise. All she could do was nod her head in agreement.

"Come on, Katniss." Peeta pulled her into line. "Don't worry about them. They're just jealous because you look so beautiful. No one will be able to tear their eyes off of you tonight...including me." He leaned in closer and whispered, "Especially me."

The tributes took their place on stage in the same manor they had the year before, off to the side, in a darkened area so the audience could focus on the main stage. The giant screens were aglow with their nation's seal and then the face of Caesar Flickerman filled the airwaves. His light purple hair, matched his suit. His teeth gleaming brightly and his voice booming over the audience's cheers.

"Welcome! Welcome! Welcome one and all to the Third! Quarter! Quell!" Caesar accentuated each word pointing his finger into the air.

Hoots and hollers from the crowd caused Katniss' stomach to churn. 'No, Peeta,' she thought to herself. 'These people could care less about us. They're not even waiting for the blood to flow. Listen to

them. They can't wait for us to get into the arena and start picking each other off one by one.'

Katniss mental dialogue was cut short when she saw Cashmere walking towards the stage to take her place with Caesar.

"Cashmere," Caesar held his hand out to her and kissed it. "It's so lovely to see you again."

Cashmere took her seat. "Sad that we had to meet under these circumstances, Caesar." She turned to face the audience. "When I think about the years I spent amongst the people...the kind...dear residents of the Capitol, I can't stop crying. How you all must be suffering over this," Cashmere acted as though Caesar didn't exist and she was having a private conversation with each member of the crowd. "I can't even imagine the pain and heartache you're all going through just knowing you'll be losing so many of us. It keeps me up at night knowing that you're in so much pain." Katniss couldn't believe how brilliantly Cashmere was playing her interview. Instead of acting like a traditional Career, she had started the ball rolling only to be followed up by her brother Gloss.

"The kindness that has been shown to me by the people of the Capitol has been nothing short of astounding," Gloss said during his interview. "Who knew there were such generous souls in the world? Not I. Not until I was...blessed with the honor of becoming your victor." He swept his arms out across the crowd who began to cheer, some cried.

Brutus and Enobaria, both life-long Careers, acted as such. They were thrilled to be back in the Games. Couldn't wait to win, but the crowd's applause had been quelled by that point. Only to be ramped up by Beetee's questions, not answers.

"Caesar, I must ask...do we...when I say we...I mean the Capitol's legal team...have they looked into the legalities of the Quarter Quell? It was my...all of our understanding that once you become a victor, you are out of the reaping for life, yet here we are, back in the Games again. It leaves me to question if this has been investigated fully. Perhaps seventy-five years ago the laws were different as opposed to now, which brings my question back into play...have the experts researched this fully?"

The year before Katniss sat in her seat, a nervous wreck, but this year she was excited, anticipating each and every tribute's interview with Caesar and how callous they were making the president of their nation appear by allowing the Quell to commence with their beloved victors as tributes.

Finnick Odair took his place next to Caesar looking as handsome as ever and Katniss rolled her eyes. The man literally turned her stomach, but when he began to recite his elementary poem, she had to bite her lip to prevent herself from laughing.

"Caesar," Finnick sounded so humble and true. "This is for my one true love that is in the Capitol right now." He looked out towards the audience. "You know who you are my love." He held his hand over his heart and began speaking.

"Your hair flows like the waves when the ocean meets the sand.

Your eyes are like the sea shimmering...sparkling...

Like stars dancing upon land.

My heart beats in sync with yours at your gentle caress.

No one would understand our love though I must confess,

This one thing to you, my darling, my dear,

My life is much better off whenever you're near."

The number of women literally swooning in the audience should've shocked Katniss, but Finnick had made an impact on the ladies of the Capitol so their reaction didn't surprise her in the least. She was sure they all thought he was speaking to them.

Johanna Mason took the stage and Katniss was truly impressed with the woman. "Caesar," Johanna took the host's hands and air kissed his cheek. Totally out of character with the woman she had been privy to over the last few days.

"Johanna, you look wonderful." Caesar tried to keep things light, but Johanna wasn't having any of it.

"You know Caesar. I don't feel wonderful. I feel horrible. Surely someone...somewhere can do something about this situation. Perhaps the creators of the Quarter Quell didn't anticipate such a bond...so much love forming between the victors and the people of the Capitol." She wiped away at a tear and spread her arms out to the audience. "I myself feel as though I have found a second home whenever I come here to the Capitol. I am always welcomed with open arms by the loving residents. The deep...deep bond that all of us victors have formed with the people of the Capitol..." Johanna shook her head in disbelief. "I just can't believe that nothing can be done to put a stop to these Games. That nothing can put a stop to the pain these poor people of the Capitol must be going through." The crowd went wild cheering on Johanna and her suggestion.

The tributes from District Eight, Nine and Ten followed up with similar suggestions, but it wasn't until Seeder from District Eleven got on stage that things really got heated.

"Caesar, back in District Eleven," Seeder's face was forlorn, "everyone assumes President Snow is all powerful. So, if he's all powerful, why doesn't he change the Quell?" The crowd began to murmur to themselves as if wondering the same thing as Seeder.

Chaff was introduced and didn't even wait for Caesar to ask him a question; he just started attacking the president's choices. "President Snow could change the Quell if he wanted to, but he must not think it matters to anyone here at the Capitol. He's not taking any of your feelings into consideration." Chaff addressed the audience directly like all the other tributes had done. "If he cared about the residents of the Capitol, then he'd put a stop to the Quell. He'd change it." Chaff sat back in his chair. "But you can see how much your feelings matter to him."

It was Katniss' turn. She stood up and walked across the stage. The sight of her in her wedding gown was almost more than the audience could take. Even Caesar Flickerman's expression was one of sorrow. There were gasps, cries, shrieks... 'Good for you,' Katniss thought to herself. 'I hope you're all suffering the way Peeta and I...the way we're all suffering tonight.'

When the audience finally had a moment of silence Caesar composed himself enough to speak. "So, Katniss, obviously this is a very emotional night for everyone. Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Her time was ticking away, much of it given up to the audience's reaction of her in her dress. "Only that I'm sorry you didn't get to be at my wedding, but I'm glad you got to see my dress at least. Isn't it just..." her voice began to tremble as she looked down at it, "...isn't it the most beautiful thing?" There was no need to look at Cinna for a signal, this was the moment. She stood up, lifted her hands above her head and began to twirl. The crowd began to scream as smoke began

to form around her. Flames started to engulf her, charred bits of silk flew into the air, pearls dropped to the floor, even her veil was covered in fire and thick smoke. The flames disappeared and her white wedding dress was no more. In its place was a dress of the exact same design, black, made of tiny feathers, her long sleeves made to look like wings, her veil had turned into a thin black sheath and tucked into the back of her dress. She caught a glimpse of herself in the television screen and realized that Cinna had turned her into a mockingjay.

She took her seat with Caesar who reached out a tentative hand and touched her. "Feathers." He looked at her. "You're like a little bird."

"A mockingjay. It's the bird on the pin I wear as my token...it's also part of our training uniform design."

"Well, congratulations to your stylist. That's the most spectacular thing we've ever seen in an interview." Caesar turned towards the area where the team of stylists was sitting. "Cinna, I think you better take a bow!"

Katniss knew what the mockingjay represented; she had seen the image on the banner the rebels were flying during the uprising. She could hear Cinna's words to her, *"Don't worry, I always channel my emotions into my work. That way I don't hurt anyone but myself."* She was suddenly petrified for her friend and what he had done. There was no way that President Snow would ignore such a blatant display of defiance. She could barely hear the buzzer over the sound of the audience's cheers for her stylist. Katniss made her way back to her seat and looked at Peeta, but he didn't meet her eyes and she wondered why.

Her eyes were glued to Peeta's image on the television screen as he took his seat next to Caesar. She wasn't about to miss one word of his interview this year.

Caesar and Peeta made a few jokes about scorched feathers and overcooked poultry and Katniss thought, 'I burnt one chicken. That was one time, Peeta Mellark and I more than made up for it later on.' The conversation quickly turned to their costumes and Peeta made a comment about Cinna and when Peeta stood up Katniss held her breath at the display she saw before her eyes. Cinna had done it again. He had made himself a target by turning her into a mockingjay in front of the nation and hammered the nails into his coffin with what he had done to Peeta's costume. 'Oh, Cinna,' She thought. 'You're in so much danger.' As the interview continued Peeta spoke about his feelings when he found out about the Quell, what a shock it was and then he said he wanted to share a secret with the Capitol. 'What secret?' Katniss wondered. 'How can you share a secret when the entire nation is listening in?' Her eye grew huge when she heard what he said. 'No, Peeta. No.' Her head was racing. 'You can't tell them about the wedding ceremony. You'll get Mayor Undersee killed if the Capitol found out what he did for us.' She almost blew out a huge sigh of relief when he explained that the marriage wasn't legal and went into details about the traditions of District Twelve. Caesar seemed to be happy they had time together, but Katniss wasn't. His comments infuriated her. 'A few months? You're happy we had a few months together? Well, we deserve more than that.' Apparently Peeta thought so too, because he said so. His voice sounded so bitter, his eyes were filled with tears as he said, "Maybe I'd agree with you, Caesar...if it weren't for the baby." Katniss' hands flew to her stomach, her eyes were still stinging from the smoke, but the tears that were quickly building up were real as she thought to herself, 'How did you know, Peeta? How did you know?'

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 19: Let the Games BeginAgain!, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Eighteen: Let the Games Begin...Again!**

**In the previous chapters, Peeta announced to the world during his interview that he and Katniss were married and that she was pregnant. Katniss had no clue how he figured it out, but how did she find out about it? Katniss turned into a mockingjay during her interview and Peeta turned into...something, but we don't know what...yet! Gale and Peeta had finally forged a friendship. Haymitch and Effie...well, they're Haymitch and Effie.**



Thank you for waiting so patiently. My vaca was lovely. You may not want to hear this but both of my betas are going on vacation too and trust me when I say I must have beta readers before posting. As it is, I'm posting this with only one beta and not the two I normally use which is probably a huge mistake on my part, but I thought I had made you wait long enough so if there are major mistakes...forgive me. I suck. To my betas, Thank You! They take time from their busy lives and correct my mistakes. It's tedious and I appreciate both S and A very much. To my readers, WOW! Your kind words have knocked me off my feet. I shall never speak about writing shorter chapters again. ;-) Thank you for your encouragement and for inspiring me. Most of all thank you to Suzanne Collins. It's your sandbox I'm playing in. In fact, what say we all go find out what's happening in...

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

Octavia's cries echoed through the empty suite as Peeta made his way to his bedroom. He was tempted to stop and console the girl, but he was certain if he had gone up to her he'd only cause her more pain, so he passed by the buffet of food, not feeling the slightest bit hungry, wondering if Katniss would get a chance to eat, reminding himself that she was a big girl and could feed herself, then took shelter behind closed doors. He sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands, his prep team wouldn't show up for awhile yet. He was dreading where he and Katniss would be in less than twenty-four hours. The blood and gore of the arena awaited their arrival and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He showered, one less thing for his prep team to make him do, utilizing Katniss' favorite scent, cinnamon, put on some fresh boxer shorts and a robe. His prep team would most likely make him strip down, though nudity never bothered him in the past, allowing the others to see him in the raw now irked him. He thought of it as a sign of intimacy that he and Katniss shared with one

another, not something to put on display for everyone else. He roamed around his room, his bare feet padding across the carpeting, killing time, trying not to let his mind wander towards the impending doom that awaited the tributes.

"Hey, kid." Haymitch walked in unannounced followed by Effie.

"Good morning, Peeta," her voice was chipper as usual.

"Morning you two." He forced a smile.

"Ready for your interview tonight?" Haymitch shut the door behind them.

Peeta nodded and said, "Yeah. Oh, and thanks."

"For what?" Haymitch asked.

"For yesterday...giving me and Katniss the day off." The corner of Peeta's mouth lifted in a soft grin. "We really needed some time alone together."

"Don't thank me." Haymitch stuck his thumb out towards Effie.

It didn't come as a surprise that Effie was the one to suggest they forgo prepping for the interviews. "Thanks a lot, Effie."

"Oh," she waved her hand in the air as though it was nothing. "Pish posh. Why should I waste my time on preparing you two for interviews when you just came off of the Victory Tour? Besides, I needed to get my nails done and I wanted to pick up something to wear for the interview tonight, not to mention I got a full body polish at the medical bay."

Peeta smiled at her and said, "No wonder you're all aglow." he turned to Haymitch. "Doesn't she look dazzling?"

Haymitch made a face like he couldn't care less and said, "Yeah, sure, whatever, kid. So," he rubbed his hands together, "what are you going to talk about tonight?"

"Don't worry about it, Haymitch. I've got it covered." Peeta turned away from the pair.

"Okay, you've got it covered, but tell me anyway." Haymitch insisted. "What're you going to..."

"I said don't worry about it!" Peeta snapped at his mentor then thought better of it. "Look, I can handle myself with Caesar. I'd rather not talk about my interview if it's just the same with you."

Haymitch was just about to open his mouth again until Effie spoke up. "That's perfectly fine, Peeta. It's your interview not Haymitch's." She glared at the mentor. "Have you eaten? Shall I order you some breakfast?"

"I'm good, Effie, but..." his protective instinct was kicking in, "...could you make sure Katniss has eaten? Her prep team showed up pretty early this morning."

"I've already spent some time with her and made certain she was to be fed. The attendants were bringing in several plates of food as we entered your room for her and her team," Effie eased his worries.

Peeta smiled thinking, 'They were probably all for her.' "Thanks, Effie."

"All right, kid." Haymitch reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his flask. "This is the plan..."

"Haymitch!" Effie immediately started in on him. "Really. Must you start on that so early in the morning?"

"Get off my ass will you?" He twisted off the cap.

"I will do no such thing." She reached for the small silver container.

"Who are you? My mother?"

"If I were, you'd learn to bathe and most certainly wouldn't be a drunken buffoon!" She tried to get the flask from his hand but he held it out of reach.

"Leave me alone!" Haymitch was spilling little drops of whiskey onto the carpeting.

"Put the damn bottle away!" Effie yelled at him. Peeta bit back his smile watching the duo go at it.

"Woman, you're getting on my last nerve!"

"Do not call me woman!"

"Why," Haymitch made a face at her and let his hand drop without thinking. "Aren't you one?"

Effie snatched the flask out of his hand and said, "Aha!"

"Shit!" Haymitch grumbled.

Peeta could no longer hold in his laughter. This was just what he needed to lighten up his spirit.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" Haymitch said with a disgruntle tone.

"I was just thinking...if Katniss and I ever reached your age, we'd probably sound a lot like the two of you when we argued."

Effie became flustered. "Why...why...we're not a couple like you and Katniss."

"You sure sound like you are," Peeta stood up and took the cap out of Haymitch's hand, then the flask out of Effie's. He placed the lid on it and handed it to his escort.

"Here," she shoved the tiny bottle at Haymitch. "If you take one swallow from that bottle Haymitch, I shall shove that flask where the sun doesn't shine."

He glared at her and shoved the flask back into his jacket pocket. "Nag."

"Buffoon." Effie tugged at the hem of her jacket.

Peeta hid his smile behind his hand.

His prep team arrived and with them so did the tears. It seemed that Katniss' group wasn't the only ones to feel the loss of their tribute. He was grateful when Portia showed up with Cinna in her wake, dismissing the trio of sullen makeup artists.

"Hey," Peeta gave them a smile. "What are you doing here, Cinna? Shouldn't you be in with Katniss?"

"I'm on my way. I just wanted to show you my handiwork on your jacket." He unzipped the garment bag, pulled out the black tuxedo jacket, spread it open on the bed and showed Peeta the lining. "Notice how detailed the stitching is?"

There was something familiar about the pattern that had been sewn into the lining of the fabric. Peeta had seen it before. It wasn't a traditional stitch, but a shape...no, a...code! Peeta's eyes flew up to Cinna's and he gave him a nod. It had been months since he had received anything in code from the rebels, he wasn't sure if he could decipher it from memory anymore. The pattern wasn't straight across either; it was sewn in a circle around the inside of the jacket so some of it was upside-down. Peeta tried to read it; he could make out some of the letters, but not all of them. ALL\_-\_S \_N AR\_-NA R\_SCU\_ PLANN\_-\_STA\_ AL\_V-\_. His mind began to race, trying his best to fill in the blanks. He could figure out the last two words, they were easy enough. 'Stay alive,' but that was more like a running joke between Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch, unless they had to fight to the end. 'Maybe there would be two victors again? Maybe...Maybe...' Cinna had left and Peeta was left with Portia who was handing him the rest of his clothes. He kept staring at the jacket. Trying his best to decipher it, but his mind was drawing a blank.

"Peeta, we have to go," Portia rubbed his upper arms. "Here." She handed him a pair of white gloves, helped him put his jacket on then stuck her hands up his right sleeve and did something. He could feel a slight tugging. "Cinna wants you to display the back of your jacket to the audience and when you do, you'll take your gloves off. The left one first and then the right one, but do not take them off until you're on stage with Caesar. He wants it to be your big finale."

"It can't be," Peeta looked up at Portia with sad eyes. "I've already got something in mind for that."

"What?" Portia wondered aloud.

"Don't worry, Portia." Peeta stood up and walked to the door. "Things will work out fine." He felt horrible, like his whole world was crumbling

down around him. It took a lot for him to lose hope, but he had. He stood at the elevator with Haymitch, Effie and Portia waiting to be brought down to the lion's den and then he saw her. A vision in white. Katniss glided towards him like an angel from above and his faith in life...in good was suddenly restored.

"Hi," her breathy greeting made his heart race.

"Hi." He couldn't take his eyes off of her. "You look...wow."

"Come. Come. You both look smashing, but we mustn't be late for the interviews." Effie was in a hurry, as usual.

"Peeta," Portia began to whisper into his ear, but he couldn't stop staring at Katniss. She was radiant in her wedding dress.

Their fellow tributes began to give them grief backstage, Peeta had expected as much, seeing them dressed for a Capitol wedding that would never take place, but he didn't care. They could say whatever they wanted, it didn't bother him one bit. It did bug Katniss though so he tried to put her mind at ease. "Come on, Katniss. Don't worry about them. They're just jealous because you look so beautiful. No one will be able to tear their eyes off of you tonight...including me." He closed his eyes and whispered against her ear, "Especially me."

Each tribute's interview got the crowd stirred up into a frenzy. 'This is perfect,' Peeta thought to himself. 'Exactly what I needed tonight.' They made the Quarter Quell look as though it were an attack on the residents of the Capitol. Then it was turned against the president making him look as though he was the reason for the Quell and had the power to stop it, but chose not to. His fellow tributes had played their interviews perfectly. Then Katniss took the stage and the crowd's reaction to her in her wedding dress was more than Peeta could hope for. They were heartbroken over the star-crossed lovers' loss. She

was brilliant, beautiful and when she burst into flames before the entire nation, Peeta knew why Cinna had told him he was the one that had designed their costumes and not Portia. The man was protecting his friend. He stared at Katniss' image on the television screen. Gone was the forlorn picturesque bride and in its place was the symbol of the rebellion, the mockingjay. He could barely hear Caesar calling out his name over the applause and made his way to the center of the stage. Katniss was heading in his direction, but he couldn't make eye contact with her, instead he thought to himself, 'Forgive me, Katniss. I'm doing this because I love you.'

"Peeta," Caesar gripped his hand and shook it. "You've got quite an interview to follow up. Your fiancé put on quite a show."

Peeta took his seat. "I was afraid she was going to go up in flames for a minute there."

"Fortunately she only looked a bit like a singed chicken," Caesar laughed.

"Yeah, I've had Katniss' chicken..." Peeta made a face, "...it looked a lot like her dress during that fire." Peeta remembered the meal she had burnt beyond recognition and thought, 'I'd let her burn a meal anytime as long as she says she's sorry for it the way she did.' "I do have to give Cinna credit though; he did an amazing job with our costumes this year."

"Don't you mean Cinna and Portia?" Caesar asked.

"No," Peeta shook his head. "Portia didn't design our costumes this year. They were all Cinna's idea." Peeta stood up to display his suit. He turned around, pulled off his left glove, then his right and flames began to shoot out from his back in the design of his jabberjay. The bird the Capitol had tried to banish was in the center of a circle as bold



as can be right in the middle of Peeta's back. The fire began to spread across Peeta's torso then the lower half of his body and in the blink of an eye his black tuxedo was gone as was the fire. Peeta was now covered with tiny feathers, so black they looked blue when the light hit them. On his back was a golden jabberjay and its wings, made of shiny gold feathers, had sprouted out of the bird as though it were in flight.

"My word," Caesar shook his head. "Cinna, you've done it again! Remarkable!" The crowd was going wild and Peeta felt his heart sinking into his stomach knowing the trouble that Cinna had gotten himself into. Caesar turned his attention back to Peeta and said, "So, Peeta, what was it like, after everything you and Katniss had been through, finding out about the Quell?"

"I was in shock. We both were. I mean...there we were...watching television...one minute we're laughing together and I'm seeing Katniss looking so beautiful in all of these dresses and the next..." He looked off into space.

"You realized there was never going to be a wedding?" Caesar's voice was gentle.

'No,' Peeta thought to himself. 'I realized there was never going to be a marriage.' "A wedding..." Peeta's voice was almost trancelike. "Can you all keep a secret?" He looked out to the audience.

"Oh, I feel most certain that we can keep a secret," Caesar said.

"We're already married," Peeta confessed.

"But...how can that be?" Caesar looked like he was completely dumbfounded.

Peeta gave Caesar a sad grin. "Oh, it's not an official marriage. We didn't go to the Justice Building or anything like that. We have this marriage ritual in District Twelve called a toasting. No one really feels married until they do it. The couple crosses into their new home together, they start a fire, break bread...sometimes they share the loaf, sometimes they don't...it's more of a right of passage than anything else. Then they say a few words to each other, their friends and family share in the festivities..." He looked out into the distance. "The toasting symbolizes the start of their life together as husband and wife." Peeta let his eyes drop.

"Were your families there?" Caesar asked.

"No. We didn't tell anyone. Not even Haymitch, and we knew Katniss' mother wouldn't have approved, but if we were married in the Capitol there wouldn't be a toasting and...well...neither one of us wanted to wait any longer so one day, we just did it." There was a soft smile on his face and tears gathering in his eyes. "To us, we're more married than any piece of paper or big party could ever make us."

"And this was before the Quell?" Caesar leaned in.

"Of course. We'd never have done it after we found out about the Quell." Peeta sounded aghast at Caesar's accusation. "But who could've seen this coming? No one. We went through the Games; we were victors, everyone seemed so thrilled to see us together and then out of nowhere..." Peeta's voice was rising. "How could we anticipate a thing like this happening?"

"You couldn't Peeta." Caesar tried to console him and placed his arm around his shoulder. "No one could, but I have to say I'm glad you had at least a few months of happiness together."

The crowd began applauding thrilled with the idea that a few months were better than nothing at all. Peeta's shoulders slumped, he took a deep breath and his eyes filled with tears as he said, "Maybe I'd think that too Caesar..." then all of the anger he had felt since the reading of the card bubbled up from within him as he glared towards the audience. "...if it weren't for the baby." On his walk back towards the other tributes one thought kept running through his mind over and over again, 'Please don't hate me, Katniss.'

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The days seemed never ending working in the coalmines of District Twelve. Fourteen hour days, six days a week and meager salaries, not even enough to cover food and coal costs for Gale's family, yet he had no choice but to spend his days in the claustrophobic environment. On the bright side, with Haymitch gone, he was paying his mother to keep tabs on his house and the people of the district were starting to use her laundry services again. Gale counted the minutes until his shift was over so he could rush to see the live interviews. He'd miss the first half, but he'd catch the most important ones, Katniss and Peeta's. As the elevator shaft lifted to the ground level Gale moved from foot to foot, impatiently waiting to make a run for it. The closest television screen was in the Town Square, but Katniss' house was a short distance away from there. He contemplated going to her mom's house, but decided against it the moment he got to the square. He didn't want to miss anything important. He listened to Johanna Mason's interview and was wowed by the victor from District Seven. "She's pretty smart," he said to the man standing next to him.

"Pretty much all the interviews have been like that," the guy said.

Gale's boyish grin was instantly plastered across his face. 'Take that Snow,' he thought to himself. One after the other the interviewees turned the Games around on their president and the entire district cheered them on, Gale included. When Seeder questioned President Snow's power Gale threw his fist in the air along with many others and shouted, "Yeah!" When Chaff said that the president didn't care about the residents of the Capitol, Gale thought, 'He doesn't care about anyone but himself.' And when Katniss took the stage decked out in a white wedding gown, Gale felt his heart being ripped out from his chest. 'Oh, Catnip,' he said to himself. 'This shouldn't have happened to you. To either one of you.' He listened to her talk to Caesar and watched her as she transformed into a bird right before his eyes. Their entire district was going crazy. Gale started yelling along with them, "Go, Catnip! Yes! YES!" People around him were hugging, cheering calling out her name... "Yeah!" Gale said with fierce determination in his voice. "Yeah." He was one of the very many people applauding the works of Cinna, her stylist. 'You did good, man. Real good,' he thought about the guy his mother said seemed like a nice enough fellow thinking maybe his mother was right after all. Then it was Peeta's turn. He looked striking in his black tuxedo and Gale thought, 'All right, Peeta. This is where you shine. Do your thing. You were so good with Caesar last year the they changed the rules to the Games and brought both of you home. Make them do it again.' He laughed along with the crowd when Peeta joked about Katniss' cooking and remembered the night she went missing after the reading of the card. The people around him had no clue how horrific that evening had been, but Gale knew, he remembered the tears, the fear and the pain that was coursing through all of them. Gale's thoughts were brought to a halt when he heard Peeta saying that he and Katniss were already married. "Wha..." he looked at the screen through squinted eyes. 'It can't be,' he thought. 'But it would explain a lot wouldn't it? Why her mother allowed them to live together. Why Katniss called Peeta her

husband...' He stared blankly at the giant screen and saw the tears in Peeta's eyes, heard the anger in his voice when he announced to the world that Katniss was pregnant. "Son of a..." Gale turned and ran from the square straight for her mother's house without stopping. He pounded on the door nonstop until someone answered, not surprised in the least to see Peeta's dad opening it up. "Is it true?" He stormed into the house. "Is it?"

"Gale," Evelyn stood up from her spot in the living room with a crying Prim sitting next to her. "Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

Peeta's father walked up behind him. "Listen, son. You need to lower your voice..."

Gale turned on him. "I am not your son! Your son is at the Capitol announcing to the whole world that he married Katniss and got her pregnant! Now I want to know if it's true or not!"

Evelyn let out a deep breath and said, "They held their own toast a few months back and..." she turned her head to the side and lifted a fist to her lips.

"Geez, he got her pregnant, didn't he?" Gale was furious. "What the hell was he thinking?"

"Last time I checked," Peeta's dad said, "it took two people to create life."

"Don't give me that." Gale started to pace around the living room. "Catnip never wanted a baby. Hell, she never wanted to get married, but your son...he just couldn't stop pursuing her and now look at the good he's done. She's going into the arena with a baby in her belly!"

"Stop it!" Prim screamed from her sitting position. "Stop." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. "Katniss loves Peeta, Gale. She wanted to marry him. She was the one that asked him to get married, not the other way around."

"We don't know for certain about the baby, Gale," Evelyn said quietly. "Peeta could be saying that simply for the Games."

"But it could be true, right?" Gale looked around the room at the three people with guilty faces. "I think we all know there's a good chance he's not lying about this." He shook his head, disgusted with the entire scenario. "Did she know?"

"If she did, she didn't say a word about it to me," Evelyn sat back down and took Prim's hand.

The room was silent but for Prim's sniffles. Gale had befriended Peeta, trusted him with Katniss' safety. He graciously bowed out of the picture and let the two of them live their lives together, not saying a word about it, in fact he had encouraged Peeta to stop pulling away from Katniss while they were training for the Games and Peeta...his friend, had betrayed him. Gale had never felt so infuriated in his whole life. It was bad enough that Katniss had to go back into the arena, but now she had a child to be responsible for as well. Peeta should've known better. "How could you let her do this?" Gale's voice was like a quiet storm as he addressed Katniss' mother. "How could you let her live with him? Marry him? If you can even call it a marriage."

"That's enough," Peeta's father barked. "You have no right to come into their home pointing accusations at them as if they've done something wrong."

"I have no right?" Gale stood in front of him. "What gives your son the right to ruin Katniss' life?"

"He did no such thing. Peeta has done everything in his power to make sure Katniss and her family has been taken care of. He was willing to die for her in the arena."

"Then he should have!" Gale shouted at the baker.

"Get out." Evelyn had heard enough. She stood up and walked slowly towards Gale. "Get out of my house right this instant."

Gale slowly nodded his head. "Fine. That's just fine. You want to go on living with your heads buried in the sand...blind to the harm that Peeta's caused Katniss. Go ahead, but I refuse to. All of our lives were a lot better off before he ever came into them."

"I said get out!" Evelyn pointed to the door. "And don't you come back until you learn how to speak about my son in law with the respect he deserves!"

Gale stormed out of the house, slamming the door in his wake. "That son of a bitch is going to get you and your baby killed, Catnip," he said to himself as he walked out of Victor's Village. Something inside of him knew this wasn't a ploy on Peeta's part. There was a nagging suspicion that Katniss was pregnant and her family's reaction did nothing to hinder his beliefs.

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Each tribute put questions into the Capitol resident's head. Cinna's wedding dress filled them with regrets for a future that would never be, but it was Peeta's words that turned even the most bloodthirsty Capitol citizen to anger. Horror filled their voices, shrieks of terror, cries and moans at the sheer enormity of it all. Peeta walked back to Katniss,

their faces filled the television screens, both of them with tears streaking their cheeks. He took her hand in his. Without thinking Katniss reached up and grabbed hold of Chaff's, but there was nothing there, only a stump of what was once a complete arm. Up and down the row the tributes began to clasp hands, united as one. The camera panned out showing their defiance across the nation then everything went to black. Mass hysteria was the only thing that came to mind as Katniss and Peeta finally stumbled their way into an elevator. Finnick and Johanna attempted to join them, but a Peacekeeper blocked their entrance and they were left to ride it on their own.

The second they stepped off the elevator Peeta took hold of her and placed her against the wall. "There isn't much time, so tell me now, did I lie, Katniss? Did I lie?"

She could barely catch her breath. What could she say but the truth? Facing him was close to impossible, but there was no alternative. She looked him in the eyes and said, "No."

His breath came out in choppy little spasms. "You're...pregnant?" Katniss just nodded. Peeta's expression went from shock to concern to sheer joy. "You're pregnant!" He wrapped his arms around her and spun her in a circle. "We're having a baby!"

"Peeta. Stop it. Are you crazy?" Katniss' hands were on his shoulders.

"Oh, sorry." He set her down and rested her back against the wall again. "Probably shouldn't do that in your condition." He rested his forehead against hers. "Wow..." his voice was breathy, "...a baby."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and tried not to cry at the thought. "A baby."



He could hear the anguish just saying the word baby caused her.  
"Katniss, stop thinking about the Games for a minute..."

"How the hell am I..." She began to argue.

"Just for a minute," he insisted. "Please," he begged. "Stop thinking about the arena and just think about the baby." He gave her a look of query. "Is this something I should be apologizing for?"

If there were no Games. If they weren't a factor in their lives, would she be happy about this pregnancy? Probably not, still she answered, "No. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"You're lying." He stood back and looked at her.

"What do you expect me to say, Peeta? The fact is, we're going to be thrown into the arena tomorrow and even if we weren't our child would probably have to face it eventually, so no...I'm not too thrilled with the whole concept of having a baby." She looked to the side. "You never wanted to have kids either, you know."

He hung his head down. "I know." He placed his hand gingerly on her stomach where their unborn child grew. "Guess I changed my mind."

The elevator doors opened up. "It's madness out there." Haymitch turned to face them. He took in their position, their bodies close to one another's, Peeta's hand on Katniss' stomach. "Shit." He reached for his flask and took a long swig. "Shit!" He took another pull. "How long have you known about this?"

"I just found out this morning," Katniss answered.

"I've suspected for a few days now," Peeta said.

"Son of a..." Haymitch let out a burst of air through his nostrils. "Damn it, kid. I thought you were just playing the crowd."

"Wish he were," Katniss walked over to the window. "So what's going on?" She wanted to change the topic of conversation before it consumed her thoughts. Since finding out about the pregnancy the only way she was able to deal with it was by pretending like there was no baby. If she thought about it, dwelled on the fact that there was a life growing inside of her, she'd lose her mind. How could she go into the arena and fight if she was constantly worrying about a baby? No. It was best to pretend like it didn't exist. She told herself it was better this way. If she was going to lose a child in the arena, at least it didn't know what it was to live. She had been trying to convince herself all day to stick with her plan of getting Peeta out of the arena alive, but now that Haymitch knew about the kid... Katniss sighed and slumped her shoulders as she stared at nothing while looking out the window. There was no way she could talk to her mentor and tell him it changed nothing. They still needed to save Peeta's life. They were out of time.

"Everyone's been sent home and they canceled the recap of the interviews on television," Haymitch answered Katniss' question about what was happening.

"Peeta, look at this," Katniss called him over to the window to see all the commotion in the street she had finally noticed.

"What are they saying?" Peeta looked to Haymitch. "Are they asking the president to cancel the Games?" In the back of his mind he was thinking, 'It's a long shot, but maybe...'

"Don't think they know what to ask for themselves." Haymitch scratched at his jaw. "The whole thing is unprecedented. The idea of opposing the Capitol's agenda...it's a source of confusion for these

people." Haymitch took on a look of remorse and said, "You know there's no way Snow would stop the games."

Katniss turned to Peeta and saw him rest his head against the cold window. It dawned on her that he was hoping the people of this community would be so outraged with the thought of a pregnant woman going into the arena that they'd demand Snow to put an end to the Quell. She reached out a hand and rubbed his back. "The others went home?" Katniss looked to Haymitch.

"They were ordered to. Though I don't know how much luck they're having getting through this mob."

"We'll never get to see Effie again," There was a break in Peeta's voice. Tears began to fill his eyes as he thought of his escort. The woman who had become a surrogate mother to him over the past year. "Will you...tell her...thanks and..." he couldn't seem to choke the words out to tell Haymitch how much Effie meant to him. How she had impacted his life and made him feel like he was cared for in a maternal way...a way he had never felt in his entire life. Even from thousands of miles away, when Peeta was hurt, Effie had found a way to take care of him. His own mother did nothing but hurt him. Effie Trinket had been more of a mother to him in one year than his mother had been his entire life.

It broke Katniss' heart to see Peeta suffering over the loss of Effie. She had respected the woman, gave her a hard time, but the truth was Katniss loved Effie Trinket for all that she had done for them. Most of all for the bond she had forged with Peeta. "Haymitch, make it really special will you? Tell her how much we appreciated her and how much we..." Katniss looked at Peeta, "...how much we loved her." Peeta turned into Katniss' arms and quietly cried into her shoulder.

They stood that way for awhile until Haymitch said, "Guess this is where I say my goodbyes."

"Any last words of advice?" Peeta lifted his head off of Katniss' shoulder and kept his arm around her waist.

"Yeah, stay alive." Peeta was hoping Haymitch could shed some light onto the missing pieces of code he received earlier in the day. He saw his mentor searching for the right words to say. "Listen to me...both of you. When you're in the arena...you just...just remember who the enemy is."

"Take care of yourself, Haymitch." Peeta spoke for both of them. "Thanks for everything."

"Yeah...alright. Go to bed. Both of you." He walked into the elevator and disappeared from sight.

They stood there, unmoving for several seconds. "Guess we should go to bed," Katniss suggested.

"I don't want to go to bed." Peeta turned her to face him and kept his hands on her waist.

"What do you want to do?"

This was the last few hours they'd have to themselves and Peeta had so much he needed to know. So much he needed to say. He let everything else go and vowed to enjoy his last moments with Katniss. "First I want to take a shower, and I'd really like it if you'd join me. I'd like to wash your hair. It might sound stupid, but I like washing your hair for you."

She raised her arms and encircled his neck. "That doesn't sound stupid at all."

"Good." He kissed her cheek. "Then I'd like to take you to bed...and not sleep." He kissed her other cheek. "Then I'd like to hold you for the rest of the night...both of you." He ran his hand down her body until it landed on her belly. "What do you say?"

Thoughts of denying him the slightest bits of joy, minute as they might be, of being a father was unthinkable. "I say, I'd like you to use the lavender scented shampoo."

They walked arm in arm to their bedroom. Peeta teasing her along the way. "You make a cute bird in that dress. Can you flap your wings for me?"

"Knock it off," her voice was deadpan.

"Come on. Just a little..." he gave his shoulders a couple of shrugs and the wings on his back went up and down. "See? It's easy."

"Want me to pluck you?" Katniss stared straight ahead as Peeta's laugh echoed through their suite.

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She stood silently in the Capitol's hideout hoping someone would show up. The streets of the Capitol were still filled with confused, angry, distraught, sorrowful residents. Effie held her breath, pacing back and forth in a tiny little path until Haymitch walked in wearing a bright yellow wig and suit. "Oh, thank heavens. I was so worried that no one would come."

"What the hell are you doing here? You could be killed if they found out..."

"They have no clue I'm here." Effie waved her hand in the air and walked to the other end of the room. "They can't keep control of anything out there right now, but I fear we only have a short time."

"Yeah, things are starting to thin out a bit." Haymitch ran his hand down his face.

Effie began to worry. "Haymitch, we must get them out of that arena. Katniss...she's...with child."

Haymitch gave her a questioning look. "How do you know Peeta didn't say that she was pregnant just to get the Capitol's sympathies?"

"Oh, really, Haymitch. Do you think for one minute that I went to the medical bay to get a full body polish? I went there to steal a pregnancy test for Katniss." Effie huffed.

"Effie," Haymitch got in her face. "You're gonna get yourself killed if you keep doing crap like that."

"Get your finger out of my face." She pushed his hand away. "We had to find out somehow."

"What made you think she was pregnant to begin with?" He asked.

Effie sighed and let her focus rest to the side. "Katniss loves lamb stew so when she threw up at the mere smell of it on the tribute train I knew something was wrong with her, perhaps a stomach virus, but then it happened during breakfast the other day, and she's been so...temperamental lately."

"And that would be different from every other day how exactly?"

Effie pursed her lips. "She's been crying over the drop of a hat, picking fights with Peeta over the slightest thing, even more so than normal. Cinna mentioned that he had to let out her costume in a...particular area...there were just signs, Haymitch."

"So you stole a pregnancy test?" He squinted. "Don't those things automatically register into a computer system or something?"

"Not the kind I acquired." Effie described it to him. "It's more of an antiquated one. A tiny device with a needle. When it takes your blood you know within seconds whether or not you're with child."

"Sounds like a computer type of thing to me," Haymitch worried.

"These don't link up with the main systems. They were created long before the Capitol started keeping tabs on each and every citizen...even the unborn ones. Anyway," she let out a sigh. "This morning I brought her in a small bowl of lamb stew, no sooner than that lid was lifted and Katniss took a whiff of it...she ran to the ladies and began retching." Effie was filled with guilt at making the girl sick.

Haymitch smirked. "At least now I know why you were so insistent on them taking the day off. So you could get into the medical bay."

"No. They deserved to spend some time together. I decided to make good use of the day and steal the test at the last minute and let me tell you, it took some doing getting an appointment for that body polish. I had to throw Viggo's name around like a school boy playing with a ball."

Haymitch's voice was full of concern. "Effie." They stared at each other from across the room. This was the first time they were able to speak freely with one another in six months and he had some things

to get off of his chest. "I don't want you seeing that Capitol official anymore. It's too dangerous."

"No worries." She played it off like it was nothing at all. "I've already gotten him on camera. Plutarch will play it for the president shortly after the Games begin and then we can move forward with the plan to infiltrate his home."

"We can't do that until all the rebels are united in the arena." Haymitch sat down in one of the chairs. "Once they are," he looked up at her, "I want you the hell out of here, you hear me? You hightail it to the rendezvous point and don't look back."

She took a seat next to him. "I am very well aware of the plan, Haymitch. However, if I can be of some use here..."

"NO!" He took her by the shoulders so she could face him. "Absolutely not! If Snow found out any of the things you've..."

"How would he find out?" Effie interrupted him. "Who would tell him?"

"He's got spies everywhere, Effie. You know that as well as I do." Haymitch let his hands drop. The thought of Snow getting his hands on her scared the hell out of him. "You've got to promise me you're gonna meet me at that rendezvous spot, Effie," his voice was unnaturally quiet. "I can't bear the thought of Snow getting his hands on you."

It surprised her to hear such a thing coming from him. "Why Haymitch, if you're not careful, I might actually believe you care about what happens to me."



He sat up and faced her. "Of course I care. You think I'm some kind of cold hearted bastard? Because I'm a drunk I can't care about people anymore?"

"I never said such a thing."

Haymitch continued his rant. "Well I do. I tried not to. I tried not to let people into my life, but you wouldn't stay out of it. You just kept pestering me...nagging at me..." He started to mimic her voice, "You shouldn't drink so much Haymitch. If you give yourself a chance Haymitch. Why do you do this to me Haymitch?" He stood up and faced her. "Why the hell did you do this to me?" He walked across the room and knocked over some of the supplies from a shelf. "Just promise me. Promise me you're gonna meet me."

Effie sat quietly for a moment then said very carefully, "I promise I shall meet you at the rendezvous point after Plutarch gives us the signal." She stared at his back. "Are you planning on yelling at me again?"

Haymitch looked over his shoulder at her and gave her a cocky grin. "Only if you provoke me."

"Fabulous," she pursed her lips and lifted her eyes. "I suppose all I need to do is breathe then. I know how the repetition gets on your nerves."

Haymitch let out a belly laugh. "I've missed ya, Trinkie."

"Don't call me that you vile little man," she grinned at him and patted the seat next to her. "We only have a few more minutes before I must leave. Let's try to be civil, shall we?"

He gave his shoulder a shrug and sat down next to her. "Seen Cinna or Portia tonight?"

Effie shook her head. "Not since the interviews." Her gloved hand went to her throat. "What do you think will happen to them?" There was absolutely no doubt in Effie's mind that the stylists would be punished for the display they had engineered on live television.

"After turning Katniss into a mockingjay and Peeta into a jabberjay?" Haymitch let out a burst of air. "I think Cinna will be lucky if he survives till morning."

"Dear me," there was a tremble in Effie's voice. "And Portia?"

"The kid probably saved her life when he said she had nothing to do with the costume designs, but they'll want to question her...find out what she knew." He sat quietly for a few seconds then said, "If they don't show up tomorrow morning you need to act like it's no big deal. Tell people they're probably designing victory costumes or something."

Effie nodded. "If they don't show up, then we'll know, won't we?"

Haymitch didn't have to answer. They both knew if Cinna and Portia didn't show up after the start of the Games they were probably dead or being tortured to death. "Another thing, Effie. No feeling sorry for Katniss and Peeta this year while they're in the arena."

"I know!" She unintentionally snapped at him. "I am well aware of how I must behave this year," her voice took on a more demure tone. "Though I'm none too pleased about it."

"It'll save your life, Effie."

"It's not my life I'm worried about."

"Well, I'm worried about your life." Haymitch rolled his head to face her. "Don't want you to die, Trinkie. I've gotten used to you being a pain in my ass."

She let her eyes wander to him and lifted the corner of the bright yellow wig he was wearing. "You look like a giant banana in this wig." Then turned away from him.

He fondled her fake gold hair. "Better than a golden cotton swab." He grabbed her chin and made her look at him. "Why do you wear all this crap, Trinkie? You look a lot better without it."

"My goodness," She removed his hand from her face. "That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Haven't I ever paid you a compliment before?"

She crossed her ankles in front of her. "Yes, as a matter of fact you have paid me a compliment. It was years ago, but as I recall, you said I had a...sweet ass." She stared straight ahead.

Haymitch let out a little chuckle and said, "Well, you do have a sweet ass."

"I'm very well aware of that." Effie tugged on her jacket sleeve.

"However, it's good to hear that you like something other than my derriere."

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Side by side, their nightly position before going to sleep each night. Their faces aligned their lips, noses and hands caressing the other's face. Their words were spoken against open mouths. Silver eyes

delved into deep blue ones. Legs wrapped together, hers bare, and his covered in pajama bottoms. Their stomachs and chests were melting into each other.

"Can we talk about it now?" He asked her. Their voices barely raised above a whisper that night.

She knew what he wanted to talk about. There was no more putting it off. "Yes."

"You said to Haymitch you found out this morning. Didn't you notice earlier that something was...off?" She shook her head and her nose brushed up against his. "I did."

"Apparently you weren't the only one." Peeta questioned her with his eyes. Katniss pulled her face back so he could read her lips. "Effie," she mouthed. "Didn't she tell you?" Still there was no sound.

"I figured it out on my own," Peeta said quietly.

"How?" It blew Katniss' mind the way others could figure out her condition yet she was completely blind to it.

Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin and said, "At first I wasn't sure...I thought maybe you were getting the flu or something. You threw up the second you smelled lamb stew on our train ride into the Capitol...anything else making you sick?"

"Hot grain," she answered. "Keep going. I want to know the rest."

"Okay." He ran tucked some hair behind her ear. Then you were acting..." he gave her a soft kiss on the tip of her nose, "...a little moody."

Katniss stroked the back of his head and kissed his cheek. "I'm always moody."

"You were...are...moodier than normal."

She scowled at him. "I am not."

Peeta brushed his lips against hers and trailed his fingers across her cheek. "You were crying one minute, laughing the next, yelling..." another kiss, "...need me to go on?"

She dropped her eyes. "No." She lifted her leg and wrapped it around his hip.

"Plus...you're my wife, Katniss. I've been living with you for months now." Her hair felt so smooth as he wrapped it around his hand. He lifted it to his nose and took in the soft scent. "You're over a week late."

She trailed her nose along his chin, he smelled like cinnamon. "I am?"

"Yeah," he let out a little chuckle. "Don't you pay attention to that?"

"Not really." She dropped her head back as an invitation to him and a soft smile played across her lips as the tip of his tongue flicked at her throat. "You're telling me you pay attention to my monthly cycles?"

"Mmmm hmmm." He worked his way up to her ear.

"That tickles." The second she felt the heat of his breath against her ear her head automatically shimmied. "What makes you pay attention to something like that?" She slowly dragged her mouth along his jaw line until her lips lined up with his.

"Because I value my sanity." Peeta smiled into their kiss. "Every twenty-eight days, like clockwork, I make you a chocolate banana cake with marshmallow frosting and you don't bite my head off."

Katniss made a little grumbling noise. "So that's why I only get that once a month."

He couldn't stop touching her...kissing her. "Didn't figure that out, huh?"

She shook her head and leaned in for another kiss. "Any other signs I wasn't aware of?"

Peeta gave her a cheeky grin and said, "I can think of two obvious ones." Then he looked down.

"Pig." She gave him a playful smack on the back of his head.

"Come on, Katniss. Like you didn't notice." He arched his brow. "They've...grown."

"You would notice something like that. And they haven't gotten that much bigger."

Peeta started to laugh into the pillow. "Yeah...okay."

"They haven't," she argued.

"Cinna had to let your dress out and you barely squeezed into your costume for the Tribute Parade."

She stuck her tongue in her cheek and blew out a breath through her nostrils. "Okay, so I went up a cup size. Big deal." She glared at him. "You're probably thrilled about my new...growth."

"Eh...doesn't really matter to me much." Peeta let his head rest against the pillow. "It's not like that's my favorite feature about you or anything like that."

"So what is...your favorite feature about me?" She wondered.

"It's a toss up between your freckles and your hair." He gave it a thought then said. "I'm going to go with your freckles."

"You're insane," she said with a straight face. "What man says they like freckles?"

"This man." He sat up, turned the lights up until they dimly lit the room, threw the covers off of her and unbuttoned her shirt leaving only the top button holding the garment together. "Besides, I didn't say which freckles I liked the most." He spread open the shirt and sat back on his haunches. He stared at her torso and closed his eyes.

"What are you doing?" She looked at him like he had gone mad.

"I'm sketching you."

She glanced around. "I don't see a pad of paper or a pencil."

He tapped at his head. "In my mind...this way I can take it into the arena with me and..." he opened his eyes and trailed his fingers just below her left hipbone, "...I can take these freckles with me too." He gave her a devilish smile.

She picked up his pillow and swatted him in the head with it. "Hurry up and finish your picture. I'm cold."

He looked at her for a couple more minutes then buttoned her back up, shut off the light and took up his position facing her again.

"Katniss, how could you not notice these changes in your body?"

She shrugged. "Guess I had more pressing things on my mind." She let her forehead rest against his. "Now that I know about it..." Now that she knew about the pregnancy she didn't want to think about it. She hated talking about it, but Peeta was thrilled with it for some odd reason.

Peeta kissed her forehead, holding the back of her head with both hands. "I know we said we never wanted this, but the truth is...when you told me tonight...it was like something inside of me jumped for joy." He ran his hand between their bodies and placed it on her stomach. "Suddenly there was nothing in the world I wanted more than our baby. I mean...I thought you were, but I wasn't sure...not until you told me and then..." His face took on a dreamlike expression. "I love it already, Katniss."

It was killing her listening to him talk about this child that was sure to die before it even had a chance at life. "But Peeta it will never..."

"Shhh..." He kissed her to stop her words. "Don't. I know what you're going to say, but don't." He brushed his nose back and forth against hers. "Let's enjoy it for a little while...just for awhile. Let's be a family, Katniss. Even if it's only for this brief moment in time."

Denying him this privilege was something the Capitol couldn't take away from him and there was no way she could either, so Katniss blinked away the tears and followed her heart. "Okay." She cupped his cheeks in her hands and placed a light kiss against his lips. "We can be a family."

"You mean, you'll allow it?" Peeta's eyes were bright with excitement.

"I'll allow it."

"Good." He pulled her even closer to him. "Let's name our baby."



"What?" The desire to scream out NO at the top of her lungs had to be fought.

"We can't keep calling the baby it. We've got to come up with names." There was a method to his madness. Peeta knew if he helped Katniss to see the pregnancy not as an inconvenience, but as a child...a life counting on her to endure, she'd do anything to fight for its survival in the arena. Giving the baby a name was the perfect way to do such a thing. "We'll work on boy's names first."

Big blue eyes were glowing with excitement. 'Are you really going to take this away from him?' She asked herself. 'You can do this. Just play along. Naming the kid won't change a thing.' Katniss made a face and asked, "Do we have to name it after bread?"

"God no."

She was relieved. "Alright." She hemmed and hawed for a moment then said, "Tristan."

"Uh...no. Unless you want our son to get his butt kicked on a daily basis by the other kids at school." Peeta grinned at her, thrilled with the fact that she was willing to give their child a name.

"Fine then you think of one," she settled into his arms.

"How about Gregor?"

She lifted her face to his and said with disgust, "We're from District Twelve not Two."

"Okay." He rested his chin on the top of her head.

"Jacob?" It seemed normal enough to her.

"Kind of bland." Peeta had the perfect name. "What do you think about Clayton?"

Katniss looked up at him. "That was my dad's name."

He smiled into her eyes. "I'm aware of that."

"You'd do that? Name the baby after my dad?" It was about the sweetest thing he'd ever done for her.

"Of course I would." He ran his thumb along the freckles that were sprinkled across the bridge of her nose.

"I'd like that." She had forgotten for the moment what tomorrow would bring and pictured a sweet little infant boy named after her father.

"Now we have to pick out a girl's name." Peeta got a thoughtful look on his face. "Hmmm...Penelope?"

Katniss stuck her tongue out. "Blech. No way." She scratched the back of her ear then threaded her fingers through his hair. "How about Ivy?"

"I like that one. We'll keep that in the running. What do you think about Felicity?"

"I think you keep picking names that are too...prissy." Katniss bit the corner of her lip and suggested, "Daisy?"

He was starting to see a pattern to her names. "What about Naan?"

"I like that name."

Peeta let out a chuckle. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Why? What's wrong with Naan?"

"It's a type of bread." He ducked his head when she swatted at it.

"Hey, you keep choosing landscaping, so I thought I'd try my hand at bread products. At least I didn't suggest Wheat." He laughed.

"Or Marble." She let out a little giggle.

"Banana nut." They both laughed.

"Okay, I'll stay away from landscaping and you stay away from bread." She looked into his eyes and said, "I have an idea, but I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

"Tell me," he encouraged her.

"Maysilee," she said softly.

"Maysilee Mellark," Peeta said it quietly. "That has a nice ring to it." He loved the name. "I like it a lot, but...I'm kind of torn between that and the bread one."

"Naan?"

"No, banana nut." They both started to laugh against the other's skin.

"Katniss, I love the name Maysilee. It's perfect."

"Do you think Haymitch would mind?" She asked.

Peeta shrugged and said, "We could ask him, but I have a feeling he'd be thrilled to have his granddaughter named after Maysilee." He closed his eyes at the feel of her fingers running over his scalp. "We have names, Katniss."

"Mmmm hmmm." 'Clayton and Maysilee,' the names she and Peeta had decided on went through her head. Suddenly putting thoughts of the pregnancy out of her mind seemed almost impossible. 'So they had names picked out. Big deal, Katniss,' she silently said to herself. 'This changes nothing. Do you hear me? It changes nothing. It's Peeta's life you need to save. Yes, and how do you think Peeta will feel about you sacrificing the life of his child in the arena just so he can live?' It was a question she wasn't ready to address. Katniss trailed soft kisses against his face leading up to his ear. "I love you, Peeta."

"I love you Katniss Mellark." He smiled when he felt her whole body shudder at the sound of her name.

"I missed hearing that." It was late and staying up could literally be hazardous to their health. "We should go to sleep."

"I know." He wrapped himself around her. "You're the love of my life. I'll never regret any of this, Katniss...not one moment of our time together."

She clutched him to her. "Me either, Peeta. Never. You're everything to me."

"You and our little banana nut..." Peeta kissed her head, "...it's what life's all about, isn't it, Katniss? No matter what, nothing will ever diminish the love I feel for the two of you."

She placed her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his beating heart. Katniss stared at a spot on the wall and thought, 'He called it our little banana nut. That's worse than the actual names. Stop it, Katniss! It doesn't change a thing!' As Peeta's fingers trailed over her belly she realized, naming their child changed everything.

They were silent for the remainder of the night until sleep finally took over. The Games were afoot.

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"Annie? Are you asleep?" Finnick moved her hair away from her face to see her sea-green eyes looking back at him. "They're going to be coming for me soon."

"I know," she whispered. The pillow under her face was saturated with tears. "Why did this happen, Finnick? We're victors? They said we'd never have to go back into the arena again."

"They said a lot of things, Annie, but they lie." He rolled her over and pulled her into a hug. "I want you to make sure you stay close to Haymitch and when he isn't around you stay close to Skip. Always have one of them by your side. Never be alone...not for one minute, okay?" She nodded. Finnick brushed away her tears with his thumbs. "Things will be fine. Have I ever lied to you?" She shook her head. "That's because you can tell when I'm lying." Leaving her behind was killing him inside, but it was worse for Peeta, he had to bring Katniss into the arena with him. He had no clue if she was really pregnant, but it didn't matter, he still felt bad for the guy. The thought of Annie having to go into the arena again... Finnick pushed it out of his mind. "Did you like my poem? I wrote it for you." She blushed and nodded her head. "Bet you didn't know I was a poet, did you?" He gave her a soft kiss. Time was ticking away. "You have to go, Annie." She sat up without saying a word, put on her clothes, her shoes and walked to the elevator with Finnick behind her. "I love you, Annie."

She threw her arms around his neck and cried softly into his chest. "I love you too. Come back to me. Please come back to me."

Finnick reached out and pressed the down button. He watched her step into the elevator and let his tears silently drop once she was out of sight. He sat on the edge of his bed waiting for his stylist to show. It took fifteen minutes; Annie had made it out just in time. He followed the procedures, the tracking devices were the same as when he went into the arena, but the device that froze them in place on the hovercraft was new to him. He remembered Mags saying the tracking devices they used when she was originally a tribute were surgically implanted directly under the skin, now they were put in with a high powered needle of some sort. The hovercraft brought him and his stylist to the catacombs beneath the arena where he ate two helpings of breakfast and drank as much water as possible. He and his stylist looked over the uniform, unsure of what it was designed for, but Finnick was sure he'd do well. He had allies this time around. Good, strong allies and the rebellion on his side. He looked down at his wrist and stared at the gold bracelet Haymitch had given to him as a signal to Katniss and Peeta for inside of the arena, 'I hope this little gold thing keeps her from piercing me with one of those arrows,' he thought. 'That little girl is lethal.' A voice called for him to take his place on the platform. He was instantly encased in a clear plastic tube. He had nerves of steel when it came to the Games, but not when it came to Annie being left in the Capitol. 'Make sure you get her out, Haymitch.' He thought as he rose to face the unknown. He closed his eyes, remembering how difficult it was to adjust from the tube to the outdoors the last time he faced the Games. He could smell the arena before he opened his eyes. He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin as his mind began to race. 'Thank you, Plutarch.' The sand is a little too bright, but other than that...I'd say this was custom built for me.' His glass tube was completely gone now. 'Showtime!'

The familiar voice of Claudius Templesmith boomed, "Ladies and Gentlemen! Let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!"

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Cinna and Portia walked arm in arm off of the elevator and towards Katniss' bedroom. They knew not to bother going into Peeta's room, he hadn't slept in there since the night of the Tribute Parade. Cinna quietly turned the handle and heard the catch in Portia's breath. He looked at the pair sleeping on the bed, Katniss had her head against Peeta's chest, the blankets were tangled between their intertwined legs, her arms were wrapped around him, with one of his hands tangled in her hair, the other cradling the lower part of her belly. Portia turned and walked out of the room with her hand covering her mouth. Cinna followed her and closed the door behind him.

"Portia," he took her into a hug.

"She is isn't she? She's pregnant." They had both thought that Peeta made it up for the Games. He was a master manipulator.

"I believe so." Cinna had his suspicions when she continually flinched during her fittings. Every time something got close to her bosom she looked like she was in pain, plus she was eating more than humanly possible and Peeta had mentioned to him on the roof that she was feeling queasy when around certain types of foods. "They'll get through this, Portia. She's strong. They both are."

Portia nodded her head, wiped her eyes and said, "I hate to wake them. They look so peaceful."

"Come on," he led her to their room. "We'll want to give them time to say goodbye to each other."

Cinna opened the door again and walked to the edge of the bed. He leaned down and placed a hand on Peeta's shoulder, gently rousing him from his slumber. "Peeta. It's time to wake up." The boy didn't move.

"He's a heavy sleeper at times," Portia gave a little smile. "Let me." She walked over to him and tickled his ear. "Peeta. Wake up." He opened his eyes. "Time to get up, Peeta."

"Katniss," Peeta said softly and started to gently shake her. "Wake up."

"Huh?" She looked up at Cinna and Portia. "Oh." Her face instantly morphed into one of anguish. "It's time."

Cinna and Portia stood to the side and watched as the pair said their goodbyes.

Katniss' bottom lip began to tremble, but Peeta said tenderly, "None of that." He ran his hands over her hair. "You remember what I said to you last year about being on fire?"

"Yes."

"Well, you're still burning hot and nothing...no one will ever put that fire out." He stood at the foot of the bed as she knelt on it. "Say goodbye to Portia while I say goodbye to Cinna."

Peeta gripped Cinna in a bear hug and whispered into his ear. "I need you to tell her something for me before she gets on that platform." He covered his hand and gave Cinna his message. "It's been an honor knowing you, Cinna."

"Peeta," Cinna said earnestly. "The honor has been all mine."



Portia stood by the door waiting and said, "Peeta, it's time to go."

He walked over to Katniss who was still kneeling on the bed and cupped her cheeks in his hands, he mouthed something to her, she mouthed something back to him then he placed a soft kiss against her lips. "I'll see you later." He didn't turn when he left the room. He walked backwards, holding onto her gaze until the very last moment until Portia shut the door.

Cinna went to her side and put an arm around her, certain she was going to collapse, but she didn't. She closed her hands into tight little fists, blew out several breaths and opened her eyes.

Katniss looked her stylist in the eyes and said, "Let's get this show on the road."

"Would you like to take a shower?" He asked her. "You've got time for a very quick one if you need to."

"No, I took one last night," she answered him.

"Then why don't you get cleaned up and I'll braid your hair." Cinna watched her as she went into the bathroom, completely impressed with her tenacity. Last year at this time she was a ball of nervous jitters, this year she was holding herself together with an enormous amount of composure. He sat her down, put her hair in its trademark braid, handed her a shift to wear and led her to the stairs.

They were greeted by a dozen Peacekeepers as they entered the rooftop garden to await the arrival of the hovercraft. "Big crowd this year," Katniss said dryly.

Cinna looked at the armed guards and felt a nervous sensation run up his spine. 'Let me send her off first,' he thought to himself, 'and then

you can have me.' There was no doubt in his mind that Snow's intimidation tactics were already in place for both him and Katniss. "I'm sure they're just taking some precautionary measure since you're all victors."

"Whatever."

Cinna stood back as Katniss was frozen into place to get her electronic tracking device implanted into her arm then joined her on the hovercraft. Their trip was silent. The Peacekeepers didn't join them for the ride, but there was no need for them to, a full dozen guards were on the craft with Katniss and Cinna and a dozen more in the catacombs when they landed. "Stay close to me, Katniss," Cinna said softly to her. The closer they got to the private room that would send Katniss into the arena, the more Cinna's heart began to race. Fortunately no one was in there waiting for them. Her breakfast was waiting for her. Cinna walked over to it and lifted the lid then slammed it down. "Katniss hold your nose."

"What?" She gave him a weird look.

"Pinch your nose closed. Right now."

"Why?"

"Because you need to eat and they've sent you lamb stew and hot grain." Cinna was furious that the Capitol would do such a thing. Sending a pregnant woman something that would make her vomit intentionally, but they were sending her into a slaughter house. By comparison, this was nothing.

"Where's the water?" Cinna held up a glass to her. Katniss drank it down and began sipping it. She put her fingers over her nose and said, "Take out the grain." She took a few bites of it, and then shoved

it away. "That's enough. Put it back." She continued to sip at the water until it was gone then held out the glass for more.

Cinna handed her the suit that all of the tributes were required to wear for the Games and examined it. "Hmmm...it doesn't look like it will offer you much protection from cold or water."

"Sun?" Katniss asked.

"I'm not sure." He dug into his pocket and pulled out her pin. "I almost forgot." He put it on her suit.

Katniss clasped her hand over his and said, "My dress was fantastic last night. So was Peeta's suit."

"I thought you might like it," his smile was tight. The more time passed the more he could see little bits of fear flickering in her eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"About what?" Katniss stared straight ahead.

"Anything." He wasn't going to bring up any topics that would upset her prior to her going into the arena.

"No." She held her hand out and he took it. They sat that way until the voice announced it was time to take her place on the platform.

"Remember, girl on fire. I'm still betting on you." He hugged her and whispered Peeta's message into her ear.

"Thank you." Katniss stood on the platform.

Cinna felt a surge of pride when he saw her lift her chin up high. He waited for her to move, for the plate to rise, but it went nowhere. She turned to him and lifted a questioning brow. He shook his head, not

sure of what was happening. Then he heard the footsteps echoing in the hallway. 'Turn away, Katniss. Stay alive. Stay alive,' his mind was going a mile a minute as the door behind him burst open and three Peacekeepers entered the room. Sharp pain stabbed through the joints of his arms as two Peacekeepers forced his hands behind his back and cuffed his wrists together. The first punch to his head, by the third Peacekeeper wearing metal studded gloves, split his skin apart and Cinna could feel something cracking in his skull. Punch after punch, metal against flesh and bone, caused his blood to spurt across the floor and his mouth was flooded with it's sharp, metallic taste. He had never felt such pain in his life. His lip tore from his face, his nose a bloody pulp flattened down to nothing. He could no longer see Katniss. His eyes were swollen closed. He prayed for unconsciousness...eventually for death. His last thought was of his mother and father. 'I hope I made you proud.' His lifeless body was dragged from the room leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

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"Huh?" Katniss opened her eyes to the sound of Peeta's voice and was greeted with Cinna and Portia's faces. It wasn't that she didn't like their stylists; she loved them, but not this morning. "Oh. It's time." Today they were a representation of the Capitol.

Peeta kissed her forehead. "I want you to make sure you eat as much as you can this morning, okay? Force it down if you have to."

She squeezed him as tight as she could. "I will. You too and drink...make sure you drink a lot of water."

"I know." He sat up with her in his arms. "You're going home, Katniss. Just remember that."

She didn't want to think of going home without him. It was ripping her heart out. She pressed her lips against his as hard as she could. "I want you to go home too," she spoke against his lips. The back of her throat started to get tighter and tighter, her bottom lip started to quake.

"None of that." Peeta's hands were stroking her hair. "You remember what I said to you last year about being on fire?"

He had told her that she was on fire long before Cinna set a match to her. "Yes."

He held onto her hand and walked around the edge of the bed till he got to the foot of it. "Well, you're still burning hot and nothing...no one will ever put that fire out. Say goodbye to Portia while I say goodbye to Cinna."

Katniss held back her tears as Portia came up to her for a hug. "You sweet girl. Be careful out there and watch out for each other. Remember what Haymitch said, okay?" Portia squeezed her.

"Portia?" Katniss wanted her to do something for her. "Can you give Peeta a message for me before he goes onto the platform?" She felt Portia nodding. Katniss whispered into Portia's ear.

Portia held onto Katniss' face and smiled. "You two...I swear, no one will ever understand your language."

"Thank you for everything, Portia. For taking such good care of Peeta...of me. Thanks." Had it been a year ago, Katniss would've found it hard to get even those simple words out, but Peeta had helped her...taught her how to open up little bits of herself every now and then.

Portia walked to the door and waited as Katniss watched Peeta finish saying goodbye to Cinna. She took slow, deep breaths and listened as Portia said, "Peeta, it's time to go."

The room was so quiet; Katniss could hear each of his breaths as he stepped closer to her. She lifted her eyes to his when his fingers gently caressed her face. "I love you, Katniss Mellark," he mouthed to her.

"I love you, Peeta Mellark," she mouthed back. The feel of his palms as he held her face gave her a sense of security, the warmth of his lips as he gave her one last tender kiss filled her heart with love and the startling blue of his eyes holding her gaze as he left the room, set her soul on fire.

She blew out several breaths and closed her eyes as Cinna put a comforting arm around her shoulder, but she didn't need comfort, she needed the fire that Peeta had rekindled inside of her. A pinching sensation began to form in the palms of her hands from her fingernails, and then she realized they were clenched. She opened her eyes, dug down deep within and found the determination she was looking for. Cinna had an almost surprised look on his face when she said to him, "Let's get this show on the road."

She didn't want a shower; she took one the night before. She let her mind guide her step by step so it wouldn't wander off track. 'Brush your teeth. Wash your face. Brush your hair. Sit still while Cinna braids it. Answer Cinna's questions. Drink some water. Put on your shift. Walk to the roof. What's up with all the Peacekeepers?' She looked around. "Big crowd this year," there was no emotion in her voice. She just went back to her thoughts. 'Tracking device inserted. Wouldn't want to lose me in the arena, would you? Got to make sure you know where I am so you can kill me off. Going to set me on fire again this

year? Well, you saw how well that turned out last year.' There were an abundance of Peacekeepers everywhere she and Cinna went, but Katniss refused to let it throw her off of her Game. 'Get in the arena, get the bow and arrows, get to Peeta then find water. Bow and arrows, Peeta, water. Bow and arrows, Peeta, water.' "What?" She turned to Cinna. She had no clue what he said to her.

"Pinch your nose closed. Right now."

"Why?" Of all the things Cinna had asked her to do this was the weirdest.

"Because you need to eat and they've sent you lamb stew and hot grain."

Katniss almost laughed. 'Looks like the Games are starting early for me this year,' the thought ran through her head. "Where's the water?" She didn't think she could stomach either the grain or the stew, so she sipped at the water, but she kept hearing Peeta's words to her, telling her to force herself to eat if she had to. 'Okay, Peeta. I'll force myself.' She pinched her nose closed and told Cinna to take out the grain. That only made her nauseous. She shoveled in as much as she could before her stomach began to feel like it was about to erupt. "That's enough. Put it back." She'd have to drink as much water as possible. She wouldn't be full, but she sure as hell wouldn't dehydrate like she almost had the year before.

The suit the tributes were provided held no clue as to what the arena might have in store. Neither she nor Cinna could figure it out. The only thing Katniss could come up with was perhaps sun. A hot blistering desert popped into her mind, but she forced it out of her head. Telling herself to knock it off.

"I almost forgot." Katniss glanced down and saw that Cinna was putting her mockingjay pin on the blue jumpsuit she was wearing. She was doing fine until that moment. The image of the bird reminded her of the danger Cinna had put himself in and she began to worry for his safety.

She grabbed his hand before he let go of her pin. "My dress was fantastic last night. So was Peeta's suit."

"I thought you might like it." Cinna gave her an almost devilish smile. It was that look on his face that caused her to worry even more for her friend. She wondered what the repercussions would be. Would they occur while she was in the arena or, if by chance she did survive the Games, would Snow wait and then take it out on him so she could witness it. She began to worry about Portia, even though Peeta had said on television that Cinna was the one that designed their costumes, would the Capitol still blame Portia for the designs as well. She knew why Peeta said what he did, she was certain that Cinna himself had instructed him to do so, because Peeta would never say anything like that otherwise. Thoughts of Effie entered her mind and what she had done for her the morning of the interviews. How they had sat on the edge of her bed after she had snuck a pregnancy test into the room. Both of them closing their eyes when they saw the positive result. Katniss had no clue how Effie had gotten the test, but she was sure that the woman had to put herself in serious jeopardy like when she had sent the medications to Peeta and Gale after they had been whipped. So many people had put themselves...their lives on the line for her and Peeta. "Do you want to talk about it?" Cinna's question interrupted her train of thought.

"About what?" There was no way she could bring up anything that was on her mind without endangering her friends, and they were her friends she realized. She loved these people. Really loved them.



"Anything."

"No." The best thing for her was to try and get her mind back on track. She held his hand until she heard the voice say it was time to take her place on the platform. The deep seeded fear she had the year before was back and she didn't know how to find the courage she so desperately needed to face the arena again.

"Remember, girl on fire. I'm still betting on you." Katniss returned Cinna's hug hoping it wouldn't be the last time she held onto him. "I have a message for you," he whispered Peeta's words into her ear.

In an instant Katniss could feel Peeta's hand trailing down her braid and his heart beating beneath the palm of her hand. "Thank you." She stood on the platform. Her husband had made sure she had the strength she needed before going into the arena. She only hoped the message she sent to him did the same for him. Katniss lifted her chin up high, just as Cinna taught her as the tube closed around her. She waited for the platform to rise, but nothing happened. She looked up and still nothing. She turned to Cinna and arched her brow, wondering what was going on, but it was obvious he had no clue either. Then the door flew open and three Peacekeepers entered the room. Katniss began pounding on the tube that encased her, screaming out his name, "Cinna! CINNA!" She watched as they handcuffed him and beat the life out of him. "NOOOOO!" She was practically throwing herself against her enclosure as they dragged his body out of sight. "CINNA!" She was screaming as the platform began to rise. Her whole body was shaking; she had to hold onto the tube to keep herself still. 'Don't move!' Her mind was screaming. 'DON'T MOVE!' There was nothing but darkness and the rapid pace of her drumming heart echoing between her ears, then bright, white light. The ground was moving, the sky an unnatural color. Her enclosure began to disappear. She could smell the ocean. See the water rippling around her. Peeta had told her

that nothing could put her fire out. She looked down and thought, 'You were wrong, Peeta. This is no place for a girl on fire.'

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" The sound of Claudius Templesmith's voice chilled Katniss to the bone. "Let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!"

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"Are you ready, Peeta?" Portia's question was all too familiar. She had asked him that very same thing last year at the very same time.

"Give me a minute." He stood staring at himself in the bathroom mirror trying to recall the feeling of Katniss' last kiss. The feeling of her lips, her breath, her skin...the look in her eyes, the way her lips moved when she said she loved him. He felt like someone was squeezing the blood out of his heart when he walked away from her, but he tried to keep his face bright...his words optimistic. It wasn't much telling her he'd see her later, but it was the most he could do considering where they were going. He splashed some water on his face, dried it off then walked into the bedroom. "Okay."

Peeta stared at the ground as they made their way up to the roof. He noticed a couple of Peacekeepers standing guard by the door and said, "Were they here last year?"

"Yes. They're here every year." Portia answered him.

He was surprised he didn't notice. Maybe he did and didn't remember. The only thing he could recall from that morning was sneaking into Katniss' bedroom. He lifted the corner of his mouth in a little grin.

"Things have sure changed over the course of a year, huh?" He

turned and looked at Portia. "I told her I loved her for the first time last year."

Portia put her arm through Peeta's. "I remember. I thought I'd get in trouble for sneaking you into her room that day."

"Look at us now. Married," Peeta grinned, "going to have a baby." His grin faded. "She has to get out of there alive, Portia."

"She will." The hovercraft appeared overhead. Out of nowhere Portia grabbed Peeta's face in both of her hands, shielding her own at the same time, moved her lips and mouthed, "The code." Peeta gave her a quick nod letting her know he understood and stepped onto the first rung of the hovercraft's ladder.

He didn't feel the implantation of his tracking device; his mind was too busy trying to decipher the message that was sewn into his jacket the night before. The missing letters were throwing him for a loop. He tried to substitute several different ones, making up words like the game he used to play when he was in school, hangman. He started with the first word. ALL\_\_ S. 'Alloys. Allens. Allots.' It was driving him crazy. Then he went to the second word thinking he might be better off working on a smaller word. \_N. 'In. On. An. This is useless.' He berated himself. There was no way he could figure it out.

"You okay, Peeta?" Portia asked as she handed him a fork for his breakfast.

"Yeah. Just...thinking...trying to...decipher some stuff out in my mind." He walked up to his tray and lifted the lid. "Son of a bitch!" He slammed it down. "Are you kidding me?" He turned to Portia.

"What's wrong?" Portia worried.

"Did you see this?" Peeta lifted the lid off of his breakfast. "It's lamb stew and hot grain." He got a look of disgust on his face and thought, 'I hope you forced some of this down, Katniss.' "They did this on purpose."

"What?" Portia looked completely confused. "I thought you liked lamb stew."

"Yeah, I do, but hot grain and lamb stew has been giving Katniss morning sickness." Peeta shoveled some food into his mouth feeling completely guilty.

"How would they know what gives her morning sickness?" Portia asked.

He had no clue until he remembered the conversation they had. "I had mentioned something to Cinna a few nights ago about certain foods making her ill plus she told me last night when we were in bed." He took a long swallow of water hoping Katniss was drinking plenty of it.

"Maybe they gave her something else." Even Portia's tone said she knew the Capitol had served the meal intentionally.

"Yeah, and maybe we're the only two getting lamb stew and hot grain," Peeta said with hatred dripping from his voice. He was worried, no, more than worried, he was petrified for Katniss. In a sick way he just wanted to get into the arena so he could get to her and protect her. "Should I get dressed? They might need me to get on the platform soon."

"Sure." Portia handed him the blue jumpsuit and purple belt the Capitol had provided each tribute for the Games. "I don't think you have to worry about cold weather. Maybe hot weather, but not cold."

"Unless they want us to suffer," Peeta's concern was getting out of control. Thoughts of Katniss freezing in the arena, wearing nothing but a skimpy jumpsuit for protection had his hands shaking uncontrollably. "Geez." He started walking around in a circle. "When are they going to start this thing?"

"Sit down, Peeta. Drink some water."

"I don't want water," he snapped. His head dropped back then rolled to the side. "Sorry." He looked at Portia. "I'm sorry." He could hear Katniss telling him to drink as much as possible and he didn't want to let her down so he reached for the glass of water and drank it.

"Do you want to talk about anything? Oh," Portia reached into her pocket and pulled out his locket. "Here. Don't want you to forget this."

"Thanks," Peeta lifted it to his lips, placed a kiss on it, and then tucked it into his jumpsuit. He looked at his stylist and realized he had a lot to thank her for. "Not just for this, Portia...for everything. I can't thank you enough. You've been more than a stylist to me, you've been a real friend and..." he walked up to her and hugged her, "I love you, Portia."

"TRIBUTES TAKE YOUR PLACES ON THE PLATFORMS."

Portia squeezed Peeta and said, "I love you too, Peeta. Remember what I said...what Haymitch said and," she whispered in his ear, "Your wife says, One. Two. Three."

He had been slowly losing his mind until Katniss reminded him how they summoned up the courage to face the impossible.

Peeta stepped back and said, "That's the same message I sent to her." Then stepped on the platform. "Thanks, Portia." He grinned at her as the soundproof tube enclosed him. He stood there staring up

into complete darkness, waiting for it to move, but it didn't go anywhere. He turned around and looked at Portia, but she just shrugged. He lifted his head again and moved his hands up and down the enclosure, slowly turning his back towards Portia until his platform raised him to its ultimate destination. Peeta didn't see Portia being led out of his room by armed guards or Cinna's bloody body being dragged past his opened door.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!"

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 20: Realizations, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Nineteen: Realizations**

Previously Cinna pulled a pretty bold stunt during the interviews with Katniss and Peeta's costumes, but tried his best to save Portia. Regardless she was taken into custody by Peacekeepers. The tributes were sent into the arena. Gale reverted back to his old self when he found out about Katniss and Peeta getting married and her pregnancy. Effie and Haymitch discussed what to do during the Games and how to behave. Most of all, Katniss was still trying to come to terms with her current condition.

Thank you to my beta S for taking on the job of two betas. A I hope you're having a blast on your vaca! S I hope you had a blast on your vaca! Thank you to all of you that read and to those of you that review. Much appreciated. As I write the Games, please understand that it tends to get a bit...emotional for me at times. It is not easy for me to write about death. I tend to get shaken up afterwards. Chances are, when you read my story, if you've laughed, then I laughed when I wrote it. If you cry, I cried when I wrote it. What you are reading is my heart in black and white. It might not be exactly what you want, but it's what I feel and I hope you enjoy it. Now...

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

'What the hell?' Johanna Mason's eyes were racing around the arena as fast as her mind. 'Damn, but that sun is bright and how the hell am I supposed to get to Nuts and Volts with all this friggin' water? Better find Finnick and fast. Plutarch you son of a bitch!' She and Finnick had worked it out the night before. She and Blight would find District Three, Finnick and Mags would find Peeta and Katniss, and somehow they'd all have to find each other in the arena. 'How much time? Thirty-two seconds. Think Johanna. Think!' She looked around for Wiress and Beetee. To her left was the male morphling. To her right... 'Who's behind Fangs?' She couldn't make out the tribute behind the

female Career from District Two that had her teeth sharpened into points and tipped with gold after becoming a victor. 'Shit! 3...2...1 Jump Johanna! Jump! I'm not jumping until I see Nuts or Volts.' Her eyes scanned the water looking for at least one of the crazy duo and then she saw the sun glinting off of Volts' glasses while he choked on some water. Enobaria had stuck his head under some waves as she made her way past him and headed to the Cornucopia. "Son of a bitch!" Johanna jumped feet first into the water and started paddling like a dog. The ocean was cool to her already hot skin as she made her way towards Beetee, cursing President Snow the entire time. 'You white haired old bastard. You had to make my life a living hell, didn't you? Shit this water is salty. The morphling probably pissed in it too.' She spit out the mouthful of ocean she was choking on and continued her mental rant towards the leader of their nation. 'I can't wait to make you pay for me being stuck in this freaking arena again. I should be sitting on my ass watching this on a giant television screen and eating all of that Capitol crap, not trying to swim my way towards friggin' Volts! Better yet, the Games shouldn't even exist, you giant pile of pig shit.' Johanna stopped swimming and took a look around. There was still no sign of Blight or Nuts, but she could see Finnick, Katniss and Peeta and they were on dry land. 'How the hell did you guys get there so quickly?' She wondered. 'Great. I'm stuck in the middle of the ocean like a piece of freaking driftwood and you're all standing around shooting the breeze like you've got nothing better to do!' She watched them talking back and forth and began waving her hands in the air, hoping Finnick would see her and Beetee. "What the..." She saw Peeta give Katniss a kiss, which pissed her off even more, because afterwards Katniss turned her head and looked directly at her. Johanna began screaming out, "YOU BITCH! YOU SCRAWNY LITTLE BITCH!" Her feet and hands started working double time as she headed towards Beetee again, determined to reach Katniss before she disappeared so she could give the girl a piece of her mind.



'You seriously have nothing better to do than stand around and make out with Peeta?' Any pity Johanna had for Katniss was long gone. 'I'm practically drowning out here and you're just having the time of your life! What is this? Your freaking honeymoon?' By the time Johanna got to the strip of land that separated her from Beetee, the rest of her alliance was heading off into the jungle. "HEY!" She screamed out to them, but none of them turned around. "Son of a bitch," she said between clenched teeth. There was only one thing she could do, get Volts and find Blight and Nuts. "Oh, for Christ sake, quit freaking out Volts, it's only water. You're not going to melt. Maybe you'll short out... Volts!" She called out to the splashing idiot bobbing away in the water. "VOLTS!" She made fists and pounded them against her thighs before resigning herself to yell out his stupid name. "BEETEE!" But he still didn't turn towards her. "I'm going to kill him myself," she vowed as she jumped into his section of water. By the time she reached him she was tempted to follow in Enobaria's footsteps and push his head beneath the waves herself; unfortunately they all needed the tech savvy man to stick around if they had any chance of getting out of the arena. She pushed his flailing body towards the strip of land as she swam behind him. Once they reached it they both ran towards the battle at the Cornucopia completely unarmed and in desperate need of the item Plutarch Heavensbee had left for Beetee.

"Grab your shit and leave Volts! Nothing more!" She warned him. She was tempted to get a weapon of her own, but there was no time.

"Yes," Beetee practically wheezed out. "Yes. Nothing more. Nothing more."

Johanna continued to scan the arena for Blight and Wiress as she and Beetee headed for the bloodbath. "There they are," she pointed towards the right. "They're waving at us."

"Yes. Yes." Now Beetee was wheezing.

They were only a few yards away from the Cornucopia. "Grab it and get out!" Johanna made eye contact with Cecelia who gave her a nod. The tribute from District Eight knew they were looking for something in particular, which is why the mother of three threw herself into the midst of the bloody battle.

The Careers from Districts One and Two had formed an alliance, as they did every year, and were fighting against the rest of the tributes at the mouth of the Cornucopia. Blades against blades, spears were being thrown, knives being wielded. It was a blur of arms, legs, hair, sweat and blood. Cecelia pushed forward, a sword as her weapon, making a path for Beetee and Johanna into the Cornucopia. Next to her was Seeder, patches of her olive colored skin tainted with dark red blood, she held a knife in each hand and was in a brutal struggle with Cashmere, who sounded as though she were having the time of her life. Her eyes bright and vibrant. Beetee dove into the mouth of the Cornucopia, his legs sticking out of the opening. He began digging through the pile of weapons, searching for the one thing they needed that would provide all of the living rebels in the arena their freedom. Seeder jumped in front of the spear heading straight for Beetee's head, taking it through her chest and falling to her knees.

"MOVE VOLTS!" Johanna screamed at the top of her lungs, picking up a shield, trying her best to avoid the knife that was flying towards them. "COME ON!" She reached for the closest weapon, a circular type of saw and used it to defend herself against Gloss who was headed for her.

Beetee's digging became a frantic search until he finally found what he was looking for, a coil of wire with two magnets, one on each end.

"Found it!" He yelled out in triumph right before Cashmere's knife headed for the middle of his back.

"GET DOWN!" Johanna kicked him, causing him to lunge forward, preventing the blade from piercing him between the shoulder blades and slicing him up the back instead. "UGH!" She howled out as she used her weapon like an ax and practically chopped Gloss in two like a tree in the woods of her beloved district. "Let's go!" She yanked Beetee by the arm, pulling him forcefully towards the ocean's buoyant waves, ignoring his howls of pain from the salt water entering his wound and pushed him as far away from the bloodbath as possible. Once she had him on a strip of dry land and away from the battle she began her visual search for Blight and Wiress again. They were making their way towards them.

Johanna looked over both shoulders, making sure no one was behind them and sat on the sand. She looked down at Beetee who was laying face down, his glasses pushed to the side of his face. "You're a complete moron. You could've gotten us both killed." Blight and Wiress still had two more bodies of water to cross then they could all head off into the jungle and get the hell away from the ocean. 'You should really meet Blight halfway, Johanna,' she thought it would be the fair thing to do. Truth be told, she didn't feel like it, she had done enough that morning, so she sat there and waited with a bleeding Beetee by her side. It was going to be a long trek through the jungle with Nuts, Volts and Blight for company. She lifted her hands up to the sky and said, "Take a look around kids..." She began to quote the short film they made the children of the districts watch on Reaping Day and called out, "The lone victor will be bathed in riches!" She cupped her hands over her mouth and screamed, "Bathed in riches my ass!"

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The District Twelve suite the Capitol provided for their team during the Games was eerily quiet when Effie entered. She had arrived early this year, before the Games began. She turned the television screen on to see the seal of Panem and walked around the room, checking to make sure everything was in order. The bar was stocked, there was ice, there was food at the ready and their attendants would be there any moment. She walked to the private quarters that were located in the back and recalled spending several nights there worrying about Katniss and Peeta last year, then traveled through the restrooms, checking her appearance in the mirror. Gold wig, black floral hat, black and gold suit, black lace gloves, black eyelashes with gold tips, black lipstick with flecks of gold. She looked every inch a member of the team this morning. Sounds began to filter in from the next room. She went in hoping it would be someone she'd want to see, but it was only a few attendants. "Coffee with cream and sugar," she ordered a girl to fetch it for her, reminding herself not to say please or to get it herself. She was a Capitol snob and she was forcing herself to play that role to the best of her ability. The coffee wasn't quite sweet enough, but she drank it anyway, not finding it in herself to reprimand the attendant that brought it to her.

"Morning, Effie," Haymitch walked in looking like he had spent the night in his clothes, heading straight for the bar.

"Haymitch." Effie perched at the end of a chair and watched the television screen waiting for the opening ceremonies to begin. "You're here early this year."

"Couldn't sleep." Haymitch plopped down on the sofa with his knees spread and a glass of thin tomato juice.

"I see we're starting early this year," she gestured to his drink.

"Get off my ass, Effie. I'm not in the mood today."

"Are you ever in the mood?" She regretted asking the question the second it left her lips.

Haymitch leaned forward and said with a lecherous grin, "Is that an offer Effie?"

She dropped her cup and saucer onto the side table and said, "Must you take the most innocent of comments and turn them into something so...nefarious? You are despicable...a swine...a...a..."

"Buffoon?" Haymitch finished for her.

"YES!" She stood up and pointed at him. "A buffoon is exactly what you are and then some."

"Yeah, yeah..." Haymitch waved his hand at her. "Loosen up your corset strings. I was just teasing."

"There area some things you simply do not tease a lady of breeding about, Haymitch." Effie pulled her jacket down. "I believe you owe me an apology."

"Good luck with that." He took a long swig out of his vodka and tomato juice.

The nation's anthem began to play, saving Haymitch from the vocal lashing he was about to get from Effie and then Caesar Flickerman began to show clips from the past few months leading up to the Games. It started with the reading of the card, and then went into each tribute's training while in their district. It moved onto shots of the Tribute Parade, then video of each tribute being introduced for their

interview, but no clips of the actual interviews themselves and finally it showed a wide shot of the arena.

"Oh my word," Effie's fingers immediately flew to her throat. "It's a beach."

"I can see that!" Haymitch stood up and pointed at his eyes. "These things work you know!"

Since being the Head Gamemaker, Plutarch Heavensbee had been off limits to everyone within the rebellion but Effie and the only time she had seen him they could barely speak to one another. A few words here, a secret note passed there, which was how he was able to inform them about the force field, but no one knew exactly what the arena had in store for the tributes.

Effie had to remind herself once again not to care when commenting on the Games. "Well, good luck getting them out of there this year. I might as well kiss a promotion goodbye."

Haymitch threw her a glare and said, "That's all you ever cared about. What was in it for Effie Trinket."

"Did you think I actually cared about the tributes all these years?" She asked him with a bit of a laugh in her voice. "Please, Haymitch. They are offered up to the Capitol for a reason. It's not like they're innocent in all of this."

Haymitch's whole face turned red and he looked like he was about to explode. "God! How the hell have I put up with your shit for over a decade?"

She sat upright and spoke with a lilt to her voice, "Dear, dear, Haymitch. I believe it is I that have been putting up with you for over a

decade and I look forward to the day that you drink yourself to death so I will no longer have to deal with you any longer." She looked at the television screen. "Now, if you don't mind. The gong is about to ring out."

Haymitch let out a loud, frustrated scream and shook his fists in the air, causing his drink to spill everywhere. "What the..." He jumped up and moved closer to the television screen. "Hah!" He turned towards Effie. "HAH! Take that you stuck up, pretentious, wench! She can swim! The girl can swim!"

Effie's heart leapt for joy at the sight of Katniss gliding across the body of water. "Good for me. I might get a promotion after all." She turned to face Haymitch and said, "However, I'm still looking forward to you drowning in a pool of your own vomit." Saying such words to him hurt her deeply, but he knew she didn't mean them, still it caused her an enormous amount of pain even putting such wretched thoughts in the air.

"Don't shoot him, sweetheart," Haymitch spoke to the screen when he saw Katniss at the Cornucopia. "That's right...he's a friend...you need him...come on, sweetheart...don't let me down...come on..." He slapped his hands together in the air and called out, "Yeah! Good girl!"

"For crimony's sake, Haymitch. Must you get so worked up over something so trivial?" Effie gave him a little wink.

He flashed her his trademark grin and said, "Effie, sweetheart. Now that Katniss has agreed to this," he pointed to the screen, "you might get that promotion after all."

"One can only hope."

As the morning wore on they waited in their suite for Cinna and Portia to show up, but neither stylist ever made an appearance. Several hours into the Games, Haymitch said, "Let's go to the party." It was the yearly festivities the Capitol put on for the sponsors and anyone who was of importance.

"Bring your little device with you." Effie motioned to the newest thing the Gamemakers provided for the mentors. A tiny computer that allowed the mentors to carry with them wherever they went and disperse tribute's gifts instantly. "And don't spill anything on it."

As they walked towards the elevator they shared concerned looks with one another over their missing allies...the possible loss of their friends. Both of them wanted to discuss it, but it was far too dangerous to do so. They entered the party, which was in full swing, and were immediately pounced on by sponsors.

"Haymitch! Your girl surprised the heck out of me when she dived into that water."

"We must sponsor Katniss and Peeta this year. Oh, I do hope she wins. Imagine how grand it would be if their child were in the arena when it got older?"

"Anything you need for the not so star-crossed lovers let us know."

Effie's eyes scanned the room for Cinna and Portia to no avail. She ordered a cup of tea and a glass of whiskey for Haymitch. When she handed him his drink she asked him, "Please do not overindulge this year?"

He gave her a nod and then downed the glass of booze in one swallow. "No problem." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.



Her lips pursed. "Vile little man."

"Prissy little nag," he countered. Their verbal tennis match was continually at play.

Effie put on a bright smile and said, "Shall I order you another? Perhaps you'll drown in that pool of vomit sooner rather than later."

"Effie, dear," she could hear the familiar screeching of another escort and recognized her voice as one of the women that had entered the medical bay while Effie was hiding underneath the shelves.

"Bitsy, darling." Effie turned to greet her. "How are you?" What she really wanted to say was, 'How dare you criticize Katniss you two faced snob?'

"Wonderful. Simply marvelous. I have the utmost faith in my tributes this year." The purple haired woman gave Effie an air kiss on the cheek. "Johanna is a fierce competitor."

"Oh, I wouldn't count out Katniss and Peeta, dear," Effie's job was to build up her tributes in public and she was proud to do so. "They're both more than capable of holding their own when it comes to the arena."

"Dear, she's with child," Bitsy said it as though Katniss had now lost all of her abilities to fight.

"Yes," Effie raised her chin and puffed out her chest, "which will give them both even more of a reason to fight till their last breath. Katniss will do anything and everything to save the life of her unborn baby and Peeta will make certain that she is the last one standing. There is nothing he wouldn't do to save the life of his wife and child."

Bitsy gave her shoulders a little shrug. "You keep telling yourself that, darling." She patted Effie's hand. "I'm sure it will give you some comfort. Well, I must go. Enjoy the Games."

Effie's eye began to twitch as she watched her fellow escort walking away. "That woman gets on my last nerve," she said under her breath to Haymitch.

"Surprised you didn't rip her yellow eye lashes off and shove them down her throat."

"It's not her *throat* I would've been aiming for."

"Come on," Haymitch led them to the table that was reserved for them. "Let's get you a drink."

The anger Effie's fellow escort caused her hadn't diminished regardless of the two glasses of wine she had drank. She kept telling herself that Peeta and Katniss would be fine. They were going to be out of the arena long before the end of the Games. They would be rescued and then her purple headed "friend" would be eating her words, yet there was a terrible feeling in the pit of Effie's stomach. Perhaps it was brought on by the disappearance of Cinna and Portia or simply because there was always a chance of death in the arena? Regardless, Effie felt her emotions turning from fury to worry over and over again and the arrival of a Capitol attendant with a note written in all too familiar handwriting added panic to the emotional turmoil she was already going through.

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Her insides were quaking from the sight of seeing Cinna so savagely beaten. It was meant to throw her off of her game and it worked. Katniss stood on her platform silently screaming to herself, 'Where are you, Katniss? WHERE ARE YOU?' Cinna had risked his life for her and she refused to let Snow win. She took stock of her surroundings, 'White hot sun, golden sand, pink sky...' she reached out to capture some of the splashing water, lifting it to her lips, 'salt water. Okay, how much time left?' There were seven seconds remaining. She could hear Peeta's message loud and clear going through her head and she drew as much strength from it as she possibly could, 'One, two, three. One, two, three...One!' She dove into the water, her body skimming across the ocean's surface much easier than her little lake back home, and made it to land in no time. There was only one thing on her mind, making it to the Cornucopia to retrieve her bow and arrows. Once she got those, she'd find Peeta then search for drinkable water. Many of the other tributes were still trapped on their platforms, some were bobbing up and down in the ocean, but none were at the Cornucopia when Katniss got there. She pulled out the bow from the pile of weapons and reached for the sheath of arrows. Maybe it was the change in the wind, or the shifting of the sand, but the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she knew she had company. She pulled out an arrow and loaded it, turning around, intending on taking out whoever was behind her.

"You can swim too!" Finnick was standing there holding a trident and a net sounding completely surprised and somewhat amused. "Where'd you learn to do that in Twelve?"

"We have a big bathtub," Katniss was on edge, ready for attack.

"You must. Like the arena?" He began digging around the supplies.

"Not particularly, but you probably love it. I think they built it just for you," her voice was harsh, full of resentment. It seemed obvious to Katniss that the arena was designed for Finnick to be this year's victor. Who else could swim? Perhaps a handful of victors. There was no pool in the training center, so you either came into the Games knowing how or you were out of luck.

Finnick stopped looking through the weapons and stared at Katniss who held her weapon at the ready. "Good thing we're allies." He ran his hand through his hair. "Right?"

The sun glistened off of the gold bracelet Katniss had seen Haymitch wearing as a symbol of their team's unity. It was clearly a sign from her mentor to trust District Four. She had a split second to make the decision to follow Haymitch's order or take out one of the fiercest competitors in the Games. "Right!" She snapped, hoping her mentor would sense her displeasure. When it came down to it, Haymitch knew a lot about the Games and it irked the hell out of her.

"DUCK!" Finnick hollered and Katniss immediately bent down. She could feel the breeze of Finnick's trident as it flew over her head and hear the wet sound it made as it sunk into the male tribute from District Five's body. "Don't trust One and Two," Finnick called out to her as he pulled the trident from the dead tribute.

Katniss ripped the sheath of arrows out of the massive pile of weaponry and suggested, "Each take one side?" Finnick nodded at her. She ran around to her right checking to see who might be coming towards them before searching for more items in the stockpile. Enobaria and Gloss had just reached dry land and were now running towards her and Finnick. It would be only a matter of seconds before they'd arrive at the Cornucopia.

"Anything useful?" Finnick shouted out to her.

"Weapons! Nothing but weapons!"

"Same here." He looked up at her. "Grab what you need and let's go."

"Damn," Katniss could see Enobaria had almost made it to the back of the horn, so she pulled out an arrow and shot at her, but the well trained Career had been expecting the attack and jumped back into the water as her form of defense. Gloss, on the other hand, wasn't as quick in his thinking or actions and Katniss was able to sink an arrow deep into his calf before he plunged back into the sea. Katniss began shoving knives and an awl into her belt, grabbed an extra sheath of arrows and slung another bow over her shoulder. "I'm good to go," she called out to Finnick as she made her to him.

Finnick lifted his chin towards Brutus who was barreling towards them from the other side of the arena with his belt undone and said, "Do something about that, will you?" Unfortunately the Career stretched the belt out in front of him, using it like a shield, preventing the arrow Katniss shot at him from puncturing his liver and a purple liquid gushed out all over his face. Brutus fell to the ground, rolled over and took cover from any further arrows Katniss might shoot at him.

Behind her, Katniss could hear metal clanking. "Let's clear out." She was certain Enobaria and Gloss would be making it back to the Cornucopia any second, Brutus would be able to get up and Cashmere wouldn't be far behind. Katniss had done what she needed to do; she got her bow and arrows and then some. Now it was time to accomplish her second objective, get to Peeta, who she could see in the distance still standing on his metal plate. "Come on," she started to run towards him with Finnick following close behind.

"Katniss," Peeta whispered her name. His artistic eye scanned his surroundings, making a mental sketch of the arena, searching for her at the same time. 'Okay, concentrate, Peeta. Where are you, Katniss?

Where are you?' He glanced at the tributes to his left...to his right, but she was nowhere in sight. 'Concentrate! Look at the arena,' he ordered himself. 'It's round...like a...like a cake. Like a cake that's been sliced. Wedges of water and sand. How many?' He counted them out. 'Twelve wedges of water...two tributes each. Twelve wedges of sand leading up to the centerpiece...' This was how he thought of the giant gold horn sitting on top of a wheel in the center of the arena. 'Behind the tributes...the frosting...the decorations...a jungle.' He remembered it from one of the tapes Effie had sent to him while they were in training. He looked at the clock counting down the seconds before he could jump off of the pedestal and thought of Katniss again, 'I'm just going to wait here for you, because I have no clue how to swim. You should've taught me, Katniss.' His heart was racing with anticipation. 'Where are you? Should I jump?' The gong sounded and he stayed in place. 'No,' he told himself. 'You'll need to find me and if I'm in the water you won't be able to see me.' It was risky, anyone could come along and kill him, but he had to take the chance and stay put. Fellow tributes had taken the plunge; others were doing the same as him, not moving a muscle. The ocean's mist was spraying against his legs, the sun beating down against him, already causing him to break out in a sweat. 'Where are you, Katniss?' It had only been a minute, maybe two since the start of the Games and already he was worried someone had killed her. 'Stop thinking that way. She can swim. She's probably one of the only people here that can.' He smirked and thought, 'Bet Snow thinks you're petrified right now. Man, I wish I could see his face when you dive into the water.' Peeta stood on his platform and waited for what seemed like an eternity. From his vantage point he could make out fighting at the mouth of the Cornucopia. "That better not be you, Katniss," he said quietly, but the moment she got a few yards closer to him, he knew it was Katniss and that she had shot at one of the other tributes. 'Put it out of your head. You're in the arena and she's fighting to stay alive,'

he reminded himself. 'Is that Finnick? What's she doing with Finnick?' He wondered. 'Thought we agreed on no allies in the arena.' Something began to nag at him. "Allies in the arena," it came out in the quietest of whispers. For some reason he continued to whisper it to himself over and over again until finally...Peeta's eyes flew wide open then it dawned on him that the code Portia and Cinna had stitched into his suit jacket had said, ALLIES IN ARENA. He watched as Katniss stood at the edge of a strip of land and Finnick swam towards him.

"Peeta!" Finnick waved at him from his spot in the ocean. "We're allies! Your girl is waiting for you!"

Peeta jumped into the water without hesitation and let Finnick haul him to shore. There was only one more bit of code to work on and Peeta knew exactly how to figure it out. He wouldn't be able to do it until they stopped to rest for the night, but once they did, he was sure he could crack it. He hauled himself up onto the dry shore where Katniss waited and walked straight up to her. "Hello again," he planted a kiss firmly on her lips thinking, "God, it's good to see you." "We have allies."

"Yes." Katniss wasn't too thrilled about it. "Just as Haymitch intended." She threw her arms around Peeta and placed a kiss on his cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't bring you to the lake this past summer." Feelings of regret consumed her now that she had seen the arena. "I should've." Instead of enjoying her time with Peeta after the Games she had kept her distance from him just as Snow intended and caused both she and Peeta a great deal of misery even after he begged her to come back to him.

"See what happens when you don't listen to me?" He teased her, trying to alleviate her guilt. "Hey, it's no big deal. Finnick can just haul

me around." Peeta turned to look at him. "So, do we have any other allies we're waiting on?"

"Only Mags," Finnick answered.

"I have no problems with Mags," Katniss saw the older woman in the distance slowly making her way towards them then checked to make sure no one else was converging on them. The coast was clear.

"Can't leave Mags behind," Finnick gave them a cocky grin. "She's one of the few people that actually likes me."

Peeta stood next to Finnick and said, "You know, Katniss wanted her on the first day?"

"Katniss is a very good judge of character," Finnick's tone was quite conversational, as if he had all the time in the world to wait for Mags and it drove Katniss crazy.

"Of course she is. She married me," Peeta chided.

"Maybe one of us should go get her?" Katniss worried and looked around again. No one was coming, but that didn't mean a thing, anyone could sneak up on them in the blink of an eye.

"Mags is a good swimmer," Finnick told her. "She'll be here any second."

"I don't mind going for her. In fact," Katniss laid both sets of bow and arrows down, "I think I should..."

"Not very patient is she?" Finnick said to Peeta.

He shook his head. "You have no idea." He could tell the waiting was driving her nuts, but she was going to have to learn that she couldn't



do everything this year. She'd have to let people do things for themselves.

"Don't you have to have patience to be a hunter?" Finnick asked Peeta.

"Oh, she'll sit for hours to wait for game, but when it comes to people..." he held up his thumb and forefinger a hair apart, "...she's got about thiiiiis much tolerance."

"Has she never heard of the saying, patience is a virtue?" Finnick asked him.

"You know I'm standing right here?" Katniss was quite frustrated with the pair of men talking about her like she didn't exist.

"Nothing wrong with her hearing though," Finnick glanced over at Peeta.

"Not in the least." Peeta walked towards Katniss who had her hands on her hips and was glaring at the two of them like she was ready to shoot them both. "Mags is almost here." He turned to look at the woman who was only a few yards away. "See?"

"I still think I should go..." she placed her hands on the knives in her belt, getting ready to remove them.

Peeta let out a sigh and kissed her to shut her up.

"Pee..." Katniss kept trying to talk, but Peeta's lips were relentless. "Pe..." They wouldn't stop. "I...Wou..." His hands were holding her arms so she couldn't push him away; his mouth was pressed against hers until she finally caved into him.

When Peeta felt her shoulders relax a little and her lips pucker...slightly he knew he'd get as much silence as he could from her. He stepped back, saw the look in her eyes that said, 'he was going to pay dearly for that later' and said, "Thank you." He turned around noticing Mags had almost reached them. "Look, Mags is right here."

Katniss' mouth formed a straight line, her fingers were drumming against her thighs and she mouthed to him, "Do that again and you'll be sorry."

Finnick crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his brows saying to Peeta about Katniss, "So that's how you do it. Good to know."

"Don't even think about, Finnick," Peeta warned him. "This alliance will end quicker than it started."

"Also good to know," Finnick turned towards Mags who was trying to tell him something. "Hey, she figured it out."

"Figured what out?" Katniss was sick of standing around. She wanted to get the hell out of there. She looked over her shoulder and saw Beetee bouncing up and down in the water and Johanna Mason splashing around in the next triangle over.

"The belts are a floatation device." Finnick bent over and lifted Mags out of the water. "You've got to propel yourself a bit," he slapped Peeta in the chest with the back of his hand, "but it'll keep *you* from drowning."

"We ready to go?" Peeta asked.

Katniss was tempted to ask Finnick to get Beetee too, but she was afraid he might want to haul Johanna to shore as well and it was bad

enough having to figure out what to do with Finnick. Either she or Peeta would have to kill him, even Beetee would have to die, the last thing she needed was Johanna Mason around too. "Here," she pulled the knives out of her belt and handed them to Peeta. "I brought you some presents."

He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin and said, "A woman after my own heart." He bent down, handed her a set of bow and arrows, placed a quick kiss on her cheek and said, "Be careful."

"You too," she kissed him back.

"Keep our banana nut safe."

Katniss gripped his arm before he turned away, staring at him, filled with a combination of fear, anxiety and panic. "Peeta," her voice was shaky as the realization of their circumstances and what she had done, smacked her in the face. She hadn't stopped to think before throwing herself into the body of water and running like a madwoman for the Cornucopia. She could've been killed had Finnick not taken out the drunk from District Five and if they hadn't left when they did, she and Finnick would be in the midst of the bloodbath right now. Her fingers trickled just beneath her bellybutton. "My God. What was I thinking?"

Peeta's eyes followed the path of her traveling hand. "It'll be okay." He pulled her against him and whispered in her ear. "Just stay strong, Katniss."

It was her fault they were in this situation, her fault Snow put all of them back in the arena. She had entered it with the intention of getting Peeta out alive, now she had to find a way to get them both out of there again. "I'm sorry, Peeta," she whispered to him.

"You have nothing to be sorry about." He could feel her heart racing against his own. "Katniss, I need you to stay focused, okay?"

He was right. She had to keep her mind in the Games. "Okay." She blew out a cleansing breath against his cheek. "I love you, Peeta."

"I love you too."

"You two ready? We shouldn't stay here much longer." Finnick was standing with a trident in one hand, a net draped over one shoulder and Mags over the other.

"Ready?" Peeta looked into Katniss' eyes.

She nodded and mouthed, "One, two, three."

"That's my girl." Peeta kissed her forehead and took the lead. "I can cut through the vines...make a path for the rest of you. Katniss, be careful back there. Keep your eyes and ears sharp."

An arrow loaded, her extra supply of them handed off to Peeta, Mags had the awl clamped between what little teeth she had left and they were on their way.

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"Ladies and Gentlemen! Let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!" Gale wanted to reach through the television screen and strangle Claudius Templesmith just for announcing the start of the Games. He sat in his living room watching alongside of his family. The Capitol made sure the beginning of the Games took place on a Sunday so everyone in the world could watch it. Gale scanned the arena and felt his heart sink into the pits of despair. Catnip had no clue how to swim.

She had never seen a body of water in her life other than her trip during the Victory Tour. He had no clue what she was going to do. How she was going to get to land? She'd be a sitting duck for anyone that could swim. 'No,' he silently said to himself. 'She's too smart to just stay on the platform. She'll jump the second that gong rings out and try her hardest.' The timer was ticking away and Gale could feel his pulse beating faster and faster the closer it got to zero. The television put close-ups of each tribute in little boxes around the screen right before the gong sounded, most of them stood in place, but to Gale's surprise Katniss dove into the water like she had been raised in District Four. "What the hell?" His eyes flew wide open. "Where'd she learn to do that?"

"Oh, my goodness!" Hazelle called out.

"Wow. Look at her go," his brother Rory was kneeling on the floor glued to their television set.

Gale leaned back against the sofa and let out a huge gust of air. "Holy cow, Catnip! Is there anything you can't do?"

He watched her swim to the strip of land then run like the wind towards the Cornucopia. "Watch out!" He called to her when he saw Finnick Odair. Once again he was taken by surprise when he saw what occurred between the two of them. "Geez," he turned to his mother. "I didn't expect that."

"Maybe that's how she learned to swim? Do they have a pool in the training room?" Hazelle asked him.

"They must." Gale answered. He continued to watch as they battled with several tributes and breathed a sigh of relief when they left the Cornucopia before the bloodbath began. "NO! NO!" Gale punched at

the sofa cushions when the camera didn't follow Katniss and Finnick, but stuck with the battle at the Cornucopia. "Where are they going?"

"Gale," his mother's voice was calm. "You know they always concentrate on the bloodbath. They won't follow the other tributes until the battle is over."

It drove him nuts not knowing what was happening with her out there. What had made her decide to join alliances with Finnick? Would they seek out Peeta? 'I hope not.' Gale doubted that would be the case, but he could dream. The night before had been one of the longest of his entire life. He had spent it going back and forth trying to decide whether or not he was right about Peeta. Had the baker's son been playing him all along or was he genuine in his actions? The more Gale thought about Peeta, took apart each scenario, the more Gale was certain that Peeta wasn't to be trusted. He continually went back on his word, saying he'd do one thing, like die in the arena for Katniss, and then do the opposite. He was supposed to stay away from her after the Games, and then he practically forced himself on her in the woods. Gale should've put a stop to it right then and there, but Katniss stood in the way. As far as Gale was concerned, any form of friendship he had formed with Peeta Mellark, was under false pretenses. The television screen split and Peeta's face appeared. He was still standing on his platform and Finnick was swimming for him. Within a minute he had reunited Peeta and Katniss on a strip of dry land.

"Hello again," Peeta smiled at Katniss and gave her a kiss. "We have allies."

"Yes. Just as Haymitch intended." Katniss was squeezing Peeta like she hadn't seen him in years. She kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't bring you to the lake this past summer. I should've."

"The lake?" Gale turned to his mother. "What lake?" His mother shrugged.

"See what happens when you don't listen to me?" Peeta said to Katniss.

"What lake?" Gale insisted as if Katniss was going to answer him directly through the television screen.

"I don't know," his brother Rory answered like he was annoyed with Gale's interruptions.

Gale's mind began to wander as his family watched the different scenes playing out before them. On one side of their television screen was the bloodbath and on the other was Katniss, Peeta and Finnick talking amongst themselves. He paid no attention to any of the comments being made around him or from the television. All he kept thinking about was the mysterious lake Katniss spoke about. 'I've known you since we were kids and you never told me about a lake. There's only one place it could be and that would be the woods, so why wouldn't you tell me about it, Catnip? Do you know how much food we could've gotten from there? I'm sure you do. Looks like you've been there plenty of times. Geez, you can swim. You told *him* about it, but not me? What was so special about a damn lake that you couldn't let me in on the secret?' Gale stood up and stormed into the kitchen for a glass of water to quench his chapped throat. The more he thought about Peeta and Katniss' little secrets the angrier he got. He had once said Peeta was able to manipulate people with his words and Gale felt like one of the many people Peeta had used like a marionette. If only there was a way for Katniss to see through Peeta's charade. He wasn't the charming, sweet boy everyone made him out to be. He was a master conniver, manipulating everyone around him to do his bidding and in the process he came out smelling like a

rose...looking like the hero. Gale slammed his hands on the counter and found himself wishing for Peeta's demise in the arena. 'I hate him,' he thought to himself. 'I actually hate the guy.' Gale paced between the kitchen and the living room several times over the next few hours listening and watching as the foursome, Mags from District Four had joined up with the trio, made their way through the arena. He got frustrated when the Gamemakers cut away from Katniss and showed the other tributes, silently cursing them. He refused his mother's offer to talk over and over again while he sat at the kitchen table letting his anger fester away at his insides. The fourth time she came into the kitchen and asked him to talk he answered her by leaving their house and going to the Town Square to watch the Games on the giant television screen. When he got there he took pleasure in seeing Katniss and Peeta's disagreement, but hated himself for being on Peeta's side.

"Why do you always have to be so damn stubborn?" Peeta's voice was low and in control, but the concern on his face was plain to see.

"I thought you liked my feisty side?" Katniss asked as she walked away from him.

"Feisty, not stupid."

She turned on him. "Stop it!" She quietly yelled at him. "Don't treat me like I'm handicapped or something. I'm still capable of doing things for myself."

"I know that, but this?" Peeta shook his head. "It's dangerous, Katniss."

"And being in the arena is safe?" She started walking away again.

"Just because I'm carrying your baby doesn't give you the right to treat me like one. We need water."



Gale's jaw tightened when he heard Katniss confirm her condition and wished death on Peeta once again for putting her in such a dangerous predicament. 'Had you just kept your word, dough boy and died in the first arena none of this would be happening right now.' His mind was going a mile a minute. 'She'd be home. She'd be with me. She'd be a victor living it up like she deserves. She'd never have to worry about money...food...but you couldn't keep your damn hands off of her, could you? You just had to keep chasing after her even after the Capitol told you to leave her alone you kept going after her. I should've fought for her. If I had just told her how I felt instead of backing down...if I had just let her know that I loved her.' He crouched down and put his elbows on his knees. 'And don't think I believe your bull about her being sold to men out there either, Peeta. That was probably just your way of getting me to feel sorry for the two of you...you wanted me to back off...pity you. God, how could I fall for your line of crap?' He slapped at his legs and got back up. 'You think because you stood up to Thread and took a whip to your hand that it meant something? Sorry, dough boy, but I don't buy it. Not anymore. Had Catnip not been there to see it you would've been like all the others in this district and ignored the whole thing. I can't wait till she gets home, and don't you worry...I'll keep my promise to you...I'm going to take care of her. I'll even raise that kid of yours like it was my...' Gale's mental rampage came to a screeching halt when he noticed that not one sound could be heard from the crowd in the square. He looked up at the screen and sucked in a breath. Much to his despair, Gale's wish had come true.

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"Where you off to?" Haymitch asked as Effie excused herself from their table.

She folded the note and tucked it into her glove. "It seems I am being beckoned by a Capitol official," she ignored Haymitch's worried expression. "If you'll pardon me."

"Well, hurry up. You're working here. I can't be expected to do this crap all by myself," Haymitch ran his hand down his face and forced himself not to stare at her back as she followed the attendant out of the party.

Effie's mother had always taught her that proper posture was of great importance. Straight shoulders, chin held high, elongated neck and tiny steps was how a woman of superior breeding was to present oneself. This was how she walked into the office of President Snow's third in command and greeted him. "Viggo, darling. How are you?" Her hands held out for him to take, a slight kiss on the cheek. "Shame on you for summoning me here while I'm busy at work." She had made the excuse after the last time she had seen him that the Quell had been keeping her too busy and his house was too far away from the Tribute Center for her to spend any long periods of time there.

"I was beginning to think you were avoiding me, dear," he gave her hand an extra squeeze putting pressure on her knuckles.

"Never, darling. This Quarter Quell has been exceptionally challenging on all of us escorts." Effie tilted her head slightly to the side and said, "Forgive me if I appear to be rude, but I mustn't stay away too long..."

"No, of course not." Viggo made motion with his arm towards a door. "This way, dear."

The first thing Effie thought of when she entered the room Viggo led her to was something Haymitch had said the year before, *"Never let them see you sweat."*

"Portia." Effie felt relief flooding through her at the sight of the stylist sitting at a table, unharmed. "Haymitch and I have been wondering if you and Cinna were working, or off doing...Lord knows what. And where is Cinna?" The tone in Effie's voice was somewhat annoyed at the stylist's disappearance.

"We've been speaking with her," Viggo pulled out a chair for Effie. "As far as Cinna goes...you needn't be concerned about him any longer."

"Well, then I guess I can forgive that." Effie fluttered her gold tipped lashes towards Viggo, trying her best not to be affected by the news that clearly stated, Cinna was dead. "Looking for Portia to design you some new attire, darling?"

"Perhaps," Viggo said with a disturbing tone to his voice.

"Dear," Effie turned to him, "I would be more than happy to look at some of Portia's suggestions for you, but this is not the proper time...the Games have just..."

Viggo cut her off, "Tell me, Effie, what you know about Portia's designs?"

"For the Games or personally?"

"For this year's Games." Viggo sat upright and took on a look that Effie recognized.

If she didn't answer correctly than Effie would pay dearly, as she had in the past. Viggo's temper was vicious, but if she answered the right way both she and Portia stood a good chance of walking out of there alive. "As far as I know, Portia had nothing to do with the design of the actual costumes themselves. In fact, she was just complaining about that to me the other day."

"When was that?" Viggo began walking back and forth behind Effie's chair.

She had to be very careful how she answered these questions. The Capitol had surveillance everywhere, they'd know what was said and when, but they wouldn't know what was said on a busy public street which was where she had bumped into Portia before going to get her nails done for the interviews. "Just a few days ago I believe." Effie tapped her fingers on the table she was sitting at. "Yes, I was on my way to get my nails done, an escort must keep up public appearances," she gave Viggo a loving look, "especially one that has a Capitol official as one's better half, and I ran into Portia. As an escort I have very keen intuition and I sensed that something was troubling Portia. When I asked her, she said that Cinna had made some adjustments to the tuxedo she had designed for Peeta to wear to his wedding and Cinna refused to let her see what was done."

"What do you have to say about this?" Viggo pointed at Portia.

"At the time, I thought he wasn't satisfied with my designs, that he might have been looking for a new partner," she answered.

Viggo turned Effie around in her chair to face him, "What did you think of Cinna's designs this year?"

"Honestly, I thought the parade was fabulous, but the interviews were a bit...gauche. There is such a thing as over the top. Really, what do those birds have to do with the Games? It was silly really, other than Cinna making a name for himself, what good did it do the tributes? Though..." Effie tapped her nail against her lip, giving it a second thought, "the people of the Capitol seemed to enjoy it, so..." Effie said it as if in passing and fluttered her hand in the air, "...I suppose it served its purpose. Sponsors are what we are aiming for and they do like a good show. Hmmm...I suppose he had to come up with a much

more exuberant way of setting Katniss and Peeta on fire this year considering everyone stole his idea from last year..."

"Is that what it was?" He cut her rambling off. "A show?" The befuddled expression that crossed both Portia and Effie's face had Viggo taking a step back...examining them.

"Wasn't it?" Effie asked. "Like I said, perhaps a way to promote his business, but other than that..."

"I still think he was trying to replace me," Portia added. "I don't think I was radical enough for him."

"Yes, dear," Effie turned to her, "your designs are a bit more...muted than his, but there is nothing wrong with simple elegance," she said to the woman with the long gold fingernails, golden eyelashes that touched her eyebrows when she blinked and matching wig.

"Thank you, Effie. I appreciate that. I only wish he would've said he wasn't happy with my work before taking over my tribute without my knowledge."

"I completely agree," the two women began conversing as though Viggo weren't there. "That was completely inappropriate and such bad manners. He should be fired for overstepping the line."

Portia shrugged her shoulders, "After the things I found out about him this morning, thanks to Viggo, I think he got exactly what he deserved."

Effie leaned over the table a bit, "Was there more? Did he try to buy you out of the business without your knowledge as well?"

"Worse than that, Effie. He was associating with..." Portia shook her head and turned away. "I can't even say it, I'm so disgusted."

"Viggo," Effie looked up at him, "should I worry? Has Cinna done something..." she barely whispered the word, "...illegal?"

"We believe that Cinna was buying and selling illegal technology," Viggo's cross demeanor was no longer in play, now it was more curiosity.

"Is that how he made their costumes go up in flames?" Effie was aghast. "Oh, my. Oh, my word."

"See what I mean?" Portia shook her head in disbelief.

"Oh, you poor girl. To be associated with someone of a..." again she whispered, "...criminal nature. You must be terribly embarrassed."

"Ashamed is more like it." Portia mustered up some tears. "I thought I knew him, but..."

"You mustn't blame yourself for the actions of a delinquent. Why he should be thrown in jail for his thievery." Effie said matter of fact.

"Cinna has been dealt with, my dear," Viggo's evil twitch was much too enjoyable for Effie's taste.

"Good. Anyone that attempts to pull the wool over the Capitol's eyes should be dealt with in a swift manner." She stood up. "Now, Viggo, is there anything else? I really must get back to work."

He paused for a few seconds then said, "No, darling." He stood up and placed a kiss upon her cheek. "We're done here."

"Fabulous. Am I to assume we'll be keeping Cinna's...dealings to ourselves?" Viggo gave her a curt nod. "Understood." Effie turned to Portia; there was only one way she could think of to get the stylist out of there alive. "Why don't you wait for me outside the door? I'd like a moment alone with Viggo." She truly hoped that he wouldn't dispute her suggestion. Fortunately he didn't. Once they were alone Effie wrapped her arms around Viggo and whispered, "Darling, you don't think I knew about this travesty do you?"

"No, my dear one. What would you know of the stylist's illicit behavior?" He asked as he gripped her a little too tightly around the waist. "If you did know something, I'm sure you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Absolutely. I would never keep anything like this a secret. To think...embezzling right under the president's nose." She released herself from his grasp and walked towards the exit. This was where Effie played her hand. "Personally, I think anyone that does such a thing deserves whatever punishment Cinna received and more." Effie was certain that their conversation was being watched by President Snow, he probably gave Viggo permission to release Effie only a few seconds earlier, and now, more than ever, she couldn't wait until Plutarch played the recording of Viggo admitting to pilfering medical supplies from the Capitol for over a decade. She watched Viggo's reaction to her comments, knowing that they would keep both her and Portia safe for the time being. "Will you still need Portia or can she resume her duties?"

"She's free to go," Viggo said with a tight jaw and no hesitation.

"Toodle ooh, darling." Effie waved her fingers at him. "Wish us luck with the Games." Then quickly left with Portia by her side.

She and Portia walked into the Capitol's party together, not mentioning one thing about their meeting to anyone. "We have guests," Effie said as she stood at the edge of their table.

It didn't strike anyone as odd to see the mentors from two rival districts sitting together during the Games, especially if their tributes in the arena were allies.

"Effie, Portia, I'd like you to meet Skip and Annie," Haymitch made the introductions and breathed a sigh of relief when both women returned to the table unscathed.

Together they sat and watched the different scenes playing out on the television screens throughout the room. On one side of the split screen was the bloodbath and on the other side was Katniss, Peeta, Finnick and Mags making their way through the jungle.

Effie would occasionally strike up a conversation with Annie when she heard the woman start to silently cry. "Finnick seemed quite surprised by Katniss' ability to swim, don't you think, Annie?" She was sitting between the crying mentor and the inebriated one.

"Yes," she sniffed. "I wonder where she learned to do that?"

"Katniss is a resourceful individual."

"So is Finnick," Annie gave Effie a bit of a grin.

The next time the screen was filled with nothing but the bloodbath Effie distracted Annie once again. "You have lovely hair, Annie, and your eyes," she tried to remember the words Finnick had recited to his one true love, "...your eyes are like the sea, shimmering...sparkling... like stars dancing upon land."



This time Annie graced her with a full blown smile. "Thank you."

Effie patted her hand. "You're welcome, dear."

"Geez," Haymitch blew out a breath. "Here we go again. It's always hot and cold with those two." He began grumbling towards the TV screen. "Get off her ass, kid. The girl knows what she's got to do."

There was a dispute playing out on television between Katniss and Peeta and one brewing at the Capitol between their mentor and escort at the same time. There was no question as to who was on whose side.

"Don't you speak to Peeta that way. He's concerned for her safety," Effie defended him.

"Oh, yeah, because the arena is such a relaxing vacation spot," Haymitch's words were dripping with sarcasm.

"No one said that, but she doesn't have to intentionally put herself in harm's way." Effie pursed her lips.

"They need water," Haymitch got in her face.

"Then send them some," Effie's faced tightened.

Haymitch threw his hands up in the air and said, "Why don't I send them in some pillows and blankets while I'm at it?"

"Because it's too hot for blankets," there was an air of superiority in Effie's snide comment.

"I can't send them water and you know it. They've got to find it for themselves," Effie was getting on Haymitch's last nerve.

"Then someone else can look for it. Katniss has to learn that she cannot be the one to constantly volunteer to do the dirty work," Effie could feel herself becoming infuriated with Haymitch and fought the urge to raise her voice.

"The girl is knocked up, not crippled."

"And she should be taking special care."

Haymitch's face felt like it was squishing into a tight ball, "If she wants to keep sponsors, she's going to have to show them she's still a strong competitor."

"I think the sponsors would help her regardless." Effie's brows were lifted so high they felt like they were rising into her hairline. "Someone else can do..."

"Who?" Haymitch cut her off. "Peeta? We both know that's not gonna happen. Finnick? He'll fall on his ass. Oh...oh...eighty year old Mags! That's who!"

Effie held her finger directly under Haymitch's nose. "Why don't you go....go..."

"Excuse me," a timid voice interrupted their conversation.

Effie slowly turned her focus towards Annie. "Yes," she said in a very controlled tone of voice.

Annie simply pointed to the television screen.

"Hah!" Haymitch slapped his hands together. "Looks like I won!"

"Ass," Effie said under her breath.

Haymitch didn't let her comment bother him, he had won their little dispute just like Katniss had, but when he saw Katniss' change of demeanor he almost wished Effie and Peeta had been the victors of the little battle.

"Don't worry," Effie said quietly. "Peeta will win this one."

Haymitch covered his mouth with his hand and whispered to her, "I hope so."

Their entire table exchanged concerned expressions until the group on the television screen were on their way again. The bloodbath disappeared from the screen, much to many viewers disapproval, and was now replaced with a close-up of Peeta slashing through the thick vines hanging interwoven through the jungle trees.

Effie leaned closer to Haymitch and quietly asked, "Why would they cut away from the bloodbath to show..." but her question hung in the air. "Peeta," she whispered. "No." Effie Trinket never gave birth to a child, but she did have a son, and he was lying dead in the arena right before her very eyes.

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"See anything up there, Peeta?" Finnick asked, his eyes peeled to the side.

"Nothing but vines, trees and sand," he answered.

"Could've sworn I saw a bird," Katniss added, "but hard to tell with the color of the sky." She was sweeping her bow and arrow around the arena, her senses on full alert, ready, willing and able to take down

any potential threat that might come their way. Her throat was getting dry, the muscles in her legs were tensing up and she was sweating like crazy. "Think we should stop...take a break?"

Finnick peeked over his shoulder. "Need one?"

"Need one, what?" Peeta asked as he slashed through a large vine.

"I think Katniss needs to rest," Finnick said to him.

"No," she snapped. "I don't. I just thought...maybe we should take a break...I could take a look around." She let her vision scan a couple of trees. "I could climb one of these...scan the terrain..." she gave her shoulder a little shrug, "...probably see what's going on at the Cornucopia...see if there's any bodies of water out there other than the ocean."

"No," Peeta had his back to her, listening to her reasoning, but he wasn't having it. He shoved the knife in his belt and faced her. "You are not climbing all the way up one of these trees. It's not happening."

Finnick stood back, put Mags on the ground and gave his shoulders a little stretch. "Might be a good idea...save us a lot of walking if she can see some water from up there."

Peeta threw a glare in Finnick's direction. "You want to see water from up above, you climb the tree, but don't ask my wife...my pregnant wife to climb it."

"Are you kidding me?" Katniss tried not to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "You're okay with me bringing up the rear, but not climbing a tree? It's a friggin' tree. I slept in them last year."

"Yeah, and you almost fell out of one right into the Careers' laps."

"But I didn't," Katniss stepped closer to him.

"Because you were belted in." Peeta walked closer to her and stuck his finger in her belt. "You think this thing is going to hold you up there? No way. If you slip and fall..." He shook his head. "I don't even want to think about it."

"I'm not going to fall." She headed for the tree that looked like it had the roughest bark so she could get good footing.

"What do you think you're doing?" Peeta turned her by the arm.

"Going to look for water," Katniss answered him.

"You are not climbing up there," he pointed to the top of the tree which he guessed was about thirty feet high. "Don't do this, Katniss."

She had climbed thousands of trees and only fallen out of two her entire life. She was absolutely positive she would be safe. "You're being silly, Peeta."

"Maybe if she..."

"Butt out, Finnick," they said in unison to the muscular tribute trying to keep them from fighting.

"Why do you always have to be so damn stubborn?" There was more worry on Peeta's face than anger in his voice.

Katniss took a few more steps towards the tree. "I thought you liked my feisty side?"

"Feisty, not stupid." He had no idea why she was trying to be so brave other than to try and prove something to the sponsors.

Katniss quickly turned and faced him. "Stop it!" She quietly yelled at him. "Don't treat me like I'm handicapped or something. I'm still capable of doing things for myself."

"I know that, but this?" Peeta shook his head. "It's dangerous, Katniss."

"And being in the arena is safe?" She started walking away again. "Just because I'm carrying your baby doesn't give you the right to treat me like one. We need water." She faced him again. "Your baby needs water. We've been walking for hours and haven't found any sign of it. What's better, Peeta? Me climbing a tree and looking for some or me walking...exerting myself for hours on end hoping to find some?"

"I know you don't want my opinion, but..." Katniss threw Finnick a deadly glare. He knew he was taking his life in his hands when he said, "You two should probably keep it down."

Peeta and Katniss looked at each other and Peeta mouthed, "Are you really willing to risk this?"

"I have to. We can't go much longer without water. It's too hot," she mouthed back.

He shook his head, knowing she was right, but not crazy about it at all. "I'm scared," his lips moved.

"I'll be okay," hers moved back.

"What the hell?" Finnick looked at Mags who just shrugged and gave him a strange look. Neither one of them had ever seen two people silently fight before.

Katniss could see Peeta's shoulders starting to slump and knew he was close to giving in. "Tell you what...you let me win this fight and I'll let you win the next one...no questions asked." She had found her voice.

"Promise?" He asked.

"Promise." She started to walk towards the tree again. She won.

He followed her to the tree, his voice full of fear, "What if you fall?"

"Then you'll be here to catch me...won't you?" She cupped his cheek. "We can even have Finnick on standby...okay?" She didn't want to tell him she was scared too, that she thought climbing the tree was stupid, but it was smarter than getting dehydrated like she had the year before. If she had the strength...the knowledge to do it in the last arena she would've found the river a hell of a lot sooner than she had. This year she knew that something basic, like making the journey up a tree, would be nothing for a regular tribute, but for her...a slip of her foot and it wasn't just a twisted ankle she'd have to worry about. She shimmied up the strange tree, only going about two thirds the way up, the limbs turning rubbery the higher she went, and looked out into the distance. The moment Katniss viewed the scene before her, she wished she had listened to Peeta and stayed on the ground. Her vantage point had given her an exceptional view of the arena. The Cornucopia, which was sitting on a mechanical wheel of some sort, was surrounded by triangular points of sand and water. The land looked as though it were bleeding, seeping into the water, where bodies...six of them, floated amongst the stained sea. The battle was still going on at the mouth of the golden horn, though Katniss couldn't tell who was who as everyone was dressed the same. "Water," she let out a tiny whisper and looked around, but saw no sign of it. Not even a living creature flying above the trees as a signal to head in a particular

direction. Her head was facing one way, but her glance was drawn to the side, to the battle and the bodies of the people that were sitting around a lunch table only days ago, laughing...joking...encouraging one another prior to their private training sessions with the Gamemakers. 'Where are the victors that held hands and blamed President Snow for their being in the arena?' She wondered. The people that had been friends for years weren't thinking twice before shedding each other's blood. Katniss looked down at Peeta and Finnick. Peeta with his arms held out as though anticipating her to drop from her precarious position. Finnick with his hands on his hips. 'My husband and Finnick...my...ally,' she thought to herself. 'I have three lives to save this year, and one of them doesn't include you Finnick.' Seneca Crane had done it the year before. He had gone against President Snow's wishes and brought both Katniss and Peeta home. 'Why can't Plutarch do the same?' She asked herself. 'Peeta and I have the best ally there is...we have the Head Gamemaker.' As Katniss' mind was forging a plan to take out Finnick Odair when he least expected it, perhaps while his back was to her and they were making their way through the jungle, she heard Peeta calling to her.

"Katniss!" Peeta could read her mind like it was an open book and it was clear from the expression on Finnick's face the he could tell what she was thinking as well. "Come down here! Now!" he mouthed to her and anyone watching would've been able to make his words out.

No sooner her feet were safely planted on the ground, Finnick asked her a little too innocently, "So what's happening out there, Katniss? Did they all join hands around the Cornucopia?"

"Give us a minute will you, Finnick?" Peeta said.

But Finnick just kept on, "Did they throw their weapons into the sea in defiance of the Capitol?"



"I said," Peeta raised his voice then immediately lowered it, "give us a second."

Finnick gave his head a little nod then added, "The past is the past. None of us here were crowned victors by chance...except maybe you, Peeta."

Peeta cringed at Finnick's words and Katniss knew that Finnick was aware of her husband's worthiness to survive in the arena. Neither she nor Finnick gave it a second thought about killing the other tributes when they were at the Cornucopia. Finnick was the first one to take a life and she had shot at Enobaria, Gloss and Brutus intending on killing the Careers. Peeta on the other hand would've tried to talk to them, perhaps widen their alliance. She watched as Finnick walked away, his back to her, Peeta's hands pulling her to the side.

"What are you doing?" His voice was low and firm. Katniss didn't answer; she couldn't tear her eyes away from Finnick's back.

"Katniss!" Peeta gave her a little shake. "Look at me." Her gaze finally met his. "No," his head was slowly moving from side to side. "He's our ally. We need him."

It had been a very long time since Katniss felt like she was on the hunt, but her senses were on fire. Her blood was pumping, her heart quickening, her pulse pounding...echoing in her head. "I haven't done..."

"It's not what you've done, it's what you're planning on doing and I say, no." Peeta turned her back to Finnick. "Are we a team?"

"The four of us?" 'No way in hell,' she thought to herself.

"No, you and me. Are we a team?"

"Yes." Peeta was the only person in the arena she'd ever consider her teammate.

"Then you don't get to make rash decisions like this on your own." Peeta began to stroke her upper arms in an attempt to rub some of the tension out of her muscles. "Before ending an alliance, we talk things through, right?" He ducked his head down, his eyes boring into hers. "Right, Katniss?"

She began to gnaw on the inside of her cheek. Finnick was probably the biggest threat in the arena and in Katniss' opinion, getting rid of him while they had a modicum of trust, was the smartest thing to do. "But Peeta..."

"You said I could win the next argument." He took her hands in his. "No questions asked."

Katniss squinted at him. "You would throw that in my face."

"Yup. Especially when I'm right, and I'm right about this." He lifted her hands to his lips and placed a kiss on her knuckles. "We need Finnick." There was still a lot of uncertainty in her eyes. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life. No," she pulled his hand to her stomach, "with our lives."

Relief flooded through him when he heard her say that. "Then trust me when I say, there will come a time when we part ways with Finnick, but now isn't it, okay?"

"Okay."

"And I wasn't trying to treat you like a baby before. I was just worried. You might think scurrying up a tree is fine, but..."

Katniss let her head hang down and admitted her fears to him, "No, you were right. It was stupid. I just kept thinking about the last arena. If I had been able to see that river from a tree I would've never been so dehydrated." She shrugged her shoulder. "I really thought it would be wiser to try and find it from above then put myself in that position again. I was literally minutes away from death last year, Peeta."

"You know...if you had just explained it to me that way we probably would've avoided the entire argument." He put his arm around her waist and headed towards Finnick and Mags. "Then again, half the time I think you pick fights with me on purpose."

"Why would I do that?" She looked up at him.

He leaned in and said, "Because making up is so much fun."

"When do we get to do that?" The corner of her mouth lifted in a little grin.

"Later. Right now I think we've been in one place for too long."

Katniss walked up to Finnick and filled everyone in, "Pretty sure there's at least six dead out there, and they're still fighting. As far as water goes...no luck. Couldn't see a thing." The tension between them was gone.

"Well, we better head out. We need to find some." Finnick lifted Mags and threw her over his shoulder.

"Be careful," Katniss pressed her hand against Peeta's heart.

"You too." He trailed his fingers down her braid. "You guys, ready?" He addressed Finnick and Mags.

"What do you say, Mags? Up for a little ride through the tropics?"  
Finnick gave Mags a flirtatious grin.

"Et's oh," she lifted her arms up to him and gave Peeta a semi toothless grin.

"You heard the woman, Katniss. Let's go." Peeta placed a quick kiss on her lips and said, "I'll take the lead again. Katniss, make sure you..."

"Stay alert," she finished for him. "I know."

They only traveled for a minute, but the dense jungle greenery was becoming more of a challenge for Peeta. "It's getting worse the further we go." He was wielding his knife through vine after vine. The muscles in his arms were on fire and he was sweating buckets.

The glint of the sun in the pink sky, 'No,' Katniss corrected herself, 'it's magenta,' seemed a little odd to her. Like the sky was rippling, 'Sort of like the force field in the training center' she thought. "Wai..." Peeta's body was thrown back so forcefully it knocked Finnick and Mags to the ground. Katniss ran to his side, leaning over his frighteningly still body. "Peeta," the smell of singed hair filled her nostrils. "Peeta," she said a little louder this time, shaking his shoulders. "Come on, Peeta. Get up." Her insides began to tremble as did the fingers she lifted to his lips. "Peeta?" His name barely came out. Her eyes grew huge when she felt no air blowing against her fingertips. Little gasps was all she could seem to take in, her entire body turned to ice, her flesh covered in goose pimples. The whole world seemed to be moving in slow motion. A stabbing pain shot through the middle of her chest like she had been shot with one of her own arrows. Her lungs were struggling for air as she placed her ear against Peeta's chest, the spot where she lay her head each night and listened for the thud of his beating

heart, but there was no sound. There was nothing but the echo of her own heart's tempo approaching a dangerously sluggish pace.

# **Catching Fire: Rekindling Chapter 21: Through the Eyes of Art, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Twenty: Through the Eyes of Art**

**In the last chapter, Gale was letting hatred lead his emotions, Peeta died and the rest of the world watched.**

**This chapter was written based on the different ways the Peeta touched so many lives through his art. I call it Peeta fluff. There's still Games and Capitol stuff going on, but you'll get a peek into the many ways that Peeta has changed the people around him. It was one of those chapters that just came to me while I was writing so I hope you enjoy it. Thank you to S for taking on the beta job alone.**

**If you'd like to see a snippet of the next chapter feel free to check out my tumblr page as I've decided to add little snips of upcoming chapters to it. [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com).**

**Now let's take a look at the next installation of...**

### **Catching Fire: Rekindling**

The life of Primrose Everdeen had been harder than most thirteen year old girls should have been. At the ripe old age of seven her father died in an explosion while working in the coalmines of District Twelve, her mother had gone into such a deep depression afterwards it was like losing both parents to the blast and her sister, Katniss, who was only eleven at the time, had to take on the role of both parents. Eventually her mother came back to her and Katniss, but it took a long time for her to heal, and she still had scars that would never fade away. Like all of the children of the twelve districts the threat of starvation loomed over Prim the bulk of her life as well as the fear of being reaped, but unlike the majority of the kids throughout the nation, Prim's name had actually been chosen from the reaping bowl only to have Katniss volunteer as tribute and take her place in the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. Last year Prim sat with her mother and watched the Games as Katniss, who had sworn off falling in love, was forced to fight to the death alongside of the one person in the world she had allowed into her heart, Peeta Mellark. Prim had known

of Peeta but never actually met him until he asked her for some help with a stray kitten he had found a few years back. The little cat had been savagely attacked, but Prim was able to nurse it back to health and Peeta had convinced her to bring it home. She named it Buttercup and it was now a permanent resident in the Everdeen household. From there she and Peeta forged a friendship. They never spoke about their meetings in the meadow after school to anyone, and Prim was only too happy to answer Peeta's questions about the different plants and herbs she picked, but one day the inquisitions shifted from what she was gathering to her sister. It was then that she realized Peeta had feelings for Katniss. She no longer waited for him to ask questions about Katniss, Prim simply began volunteering information about her sister to Peeta. She told him about things Katniss liked, things that bothered her, how good she was at hunting, but never about Gale and eventually Prim told Peeta about her father and mother. She had expected Peeta to be shocked at her mother's reaction to her father's death and how close they were to starvation, but he acted as though it were nothing new to him, like he had already known about it. When Prim asked him if he was surprised to hear such a thing, she was the one that was caught unaware.

*School had started weeks and weeks ago, the leaves on the trees had changed colors and Prim really liked the way Peeta described them to her. "The hues are captivating, aren't they? Sometimes I wonder how nature knew what colors would go so well together." Peeta pulled multiple leaves off of a tree in various different shades. "Look at the yellow one...see the tiny brown spots on it? You might think this leaf is dying, but I think its dressing up." Peeta looked down at Prim and gave her a grin. "It doesn't want to be shown up by this red one here." He held it out to her. "Of course, my favorite is the orange one, but if you mix these three shades together...I mean blend them...like a gradual thing on a canvas...it would look like a sunset."*

*"Have you ever painted a sunset before?" Prim asked.*

*"Once." Peeta looked up at the sky. "My dad got me some paints, but I didn't have a canvas or anything. I used a box."*

*"You got paints?" The thought of spending money on something so trivial was unreal to Prim.*

*"Not a lot of them. I don't even know how he got them. One day they were just sitting on my bed next to some paintbrushes." Peeta smiled at Prim. "My mom complained about it, but my dad told her that it would be good practice for me with the cakes and all."*

*"Did it help...with the cakes?"*

*Peeta shrugged. "Doubt it, but it sure was fun painting. If there was one thing in the world I could do...I'd choose that."*

*"I'd be a doctor." Prim said without hesitation.*

*"A doctor?" Peeta raised his brows.*

*"Yup." Prim clicked her heels together. "So I could heal people...like when my mom was sick. I would've been able to make her better a lot sooner."*

*"That makes sense," Peeta said letting the breeze carry the leaves he held in his hand away.*

*"Peeta?" It had been on Prim's mind for a few days so she decided to ask, "How come you didn't seem surprised by what I told you about my mom and...well...you know?"*

*Peeta swallowed hard, then told her, "Katniss and I have been in the same classes for years, Prim. When I heard about your dad's death...I*



*felt real bad about it, so I kind of kept an eye on her. She changed a lot afterwards, withdrawing from everyone around her and she lost so much weight so quickly. So one day..." he cleared his throat, "...one day, a few weeks after your dad died, I followed her home and peeked through the window. She was shaking your mom by the shoulders...yelling at her. I saw her digging through the cupboards looking for something to feed you, I saw how bare the cabinets were and...I sort of put two and two together." Peeta sighed. "Anyway, that's how I knew about it."*

*Hearing this from Peeta took Prim by complete surprise. The thought of him caring so much about Katniss, at the age of eleven, through her for a loop. She couldn't believe that a merchant's son could care so much about the well being of a girl from the Seam that he'd follow her home from school simply to check on her. "Peeta? Did you give Katniss bread?" It had been years, but Prim had never forgotten the slices of the filling bread Katniss fed them when they were on the brink of starvation.*

*"Yeah." Peeta took a few steps away from her.*

*"Thank you," Prim walked up to him and slid her hand in his.*

*Peeta squeezed Prim's hand and said, "You're welcome." He gave her a smile and said, "Isn't that what friends do? They help each other out."*

*"Were you and Katniss friends at the time?"*

*Prim could see Peeta beginning to blush. "Uh...not really."*

*"Are you friends now?"*

*His face was turning the same color as the red leaf he had shown her.  
"No, but I'd like to be her friend."*

*"Then maybe you should try talking to her," Prim suggested as they walked through the meadow.*

*"When would I do that?"*

*"Talk to her at school tomorrow."*

*"We go to the mines tomorrow. I hate those trips. Katniss hates those trips," Peeta said with a hint of sadness in his voice.*

*"Then talk to her while your there and take her mind off of that stupid coalmine." Prim grinned at him as they headed out of the meadow. Before she left him that day she asked him, "Peeta, one day, will you paint me a picture of a sunset?"*

*"Sure thing," he smiled at her and headed for town.*

Prim sat next to her mother watching the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games only this year her sister Katniss was joined by Prim's new brother, Peeta. She stared at his lifeless body in the arena and felt her mother holding onto her hand tightly. Though most thirteen year old girls would've been in tears at the sight of their brother having someone pounding at their chest and air being blown into their lungs, Primrose Everdeen counted out the beats and timed how long Peeta had been going without oxygen. Even as a young woman, she was already thinking like a physician. It wasn't until Katniss had crawled her way towards Peeta and sobbed that Prim's emotions got the better of her. "Excuse me," she stood up from her spot next to her mother.

*"Are you all right, Primrose?"*

"I'm fine," she held her tears in check. "Just need to go to my room for a second." Prim walked upstairs and sat on the edge of her bed. She stared at the portrait Peeta had painted for her before he left for the Games. She was sitting in the meadow, her goat Lady was licking her cheek and behind her the colors Peeta had described to her of the autumn leaves were mixed with a hint of pink as the sun set over the horizon. "You both need to come home," she whispered as her heart swelled with love and grief in equal measure. "Please...please come home?"

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The sound of sniffles, gasps and cries soared through the air of the Town Square as Gale stared at the giant television screen. He watched as Finnick and Mags tried to get their bearings about them and Katniss silently cried against Peeta's chest. Gale watched as the blood drained from Catnip's face, saw her struggling for air and swore he was watching her die right before his eyes. He didn't dare focus on Peeta, he couldn't bring himself to look at guy he had been wishing this very thing upon all morning long. For a split second he wondered about the baker, had he watched his son die? Chances were he was with Katniss' family viewing the Games. Gale's hands began to shake, he ran one through his hair, and he didn't know what he was feeling. Fear for the girl he loved? Pity? Sorrow? The man that had been full of hatred for only moments ago was now a hollow shell. The sounds around him began to get louder, he glanced to and fro, not being able to handle Katniss shaking Peeta...screaming at him to wake up. Then he saw the man he had wondered about, the baker. He was standing with his other two sons in his arms, they were obviously crying and his wife was a couple of feet away looking at the screen, her face impassive as stone. 'That's your son,' Gale's head was reeling. 'Don't

you even have one tear to shed for the kid you gave birth to? All these people are crying except for you.' Gale shook his head and looked at the television screen again then it dawned on him. All of the people around him were shook to the core over Peeta's death, but his mother and...himself. He turned his back and walked then ran from the square. His first instinct was to head to the woods, but the fence was on. He couldn't go home because his mother would pepper him with questions. He needed someplace he could be alone. Someplace no one would think to find him. He slid one of the windows in the back of Peeta's house open and slipped inside. The scent of yeast and bacon hung in the air. Gale glided soundlessly through the living room and into the kitchen spying a dirty plate on the table and an empty mug sitting next to it. He wondered if someone was staying there or if Katniss and Peeta had left it that way before they left for the Games. He walked up the stairs and entered their bedroom. The bed was perfectly made; he could see tiny particles of dust flitting about in the rays of sunlight that filtered through the sheer fabric which covered the windows. 'What are you doing here?' He asked himself. 'This isn't your home.' Yet that didn't stop him from opening up the top drawer that Peeta had asked him to get some pajamas for Katniss from. He saw the red and white striped shirt sticking out from beneath a blue one and pulled it out, he knew she had worn it the night President Snow had read the card, he had seen her in it. For some reason he lifted it to his nose, the scent took him off guard. A mixture of cinnamon and lavender...Peeta and Katniss. He shoved it back in the drawer where it belonged, and then he saw a piece of paper sticking out from beneath the pile of clothes. It was no ordinary paper it was thicker and more of an off white in color. Gale gingerly lifted the clothing out of the drawer and set it on the dresser then removed the thin leather binder the piece of paper was tucked inside of. Again he reminded himself that this wasn't his house. He shouldn't be doing this, but that didn't prevent him from opening up the cover and staring at the work of art

Peeta had created of him and Katniss. "Geez," Gale breathed out. The detail in which they were sketched so perfectly, the expressions on their faces, the way her hair was woven between Peeta's fingers and Katniss' hand pressed against his heart, sent a chill up Gale's spine. It was clear that this portrait wasn't meant for prying eyes. This was something meant for Katniss and Peeta alone, a gift that he had given to her. Gale read the words Peeta had written and closed up the binder, placed it back in the drawer along with the clothing and left their bedroom. He walked down the hall and saw an open door; inside the room were paintings of all sizes. Paintings of the Games, of Katniss, of Prim. Gale walked around the room examining them one by one. Gale had seen the pictures that Peeta had painted of the Games on television, but they didn't do them justice. Seeing them up close and personal had much more of an impact. The one of Gale turned into a Capitol mutt caused his stomach to churn. Prim crying on Reaping Day made him relive that moment all over again. He could hear Peeta's voice clear as day when he wondered about the paintings.

*"So what's up with all the painting?" Gale had asked him one afternoon while teaching him about snares. "You miss decorating cakes or something?"*

*"I love to paint."*

*Gale squinted and quietly asked, "Yeah, but...the Games?"*

*Peeta took a deep breath and said, "Nightmares." Gale dropped the subject after that.*

He walked around Peeta's makeshift art studio knowing he was traveling through the guy's own personal hell. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw a picture of himself. Gale's hands were tied together, hanging above his head, a rabbit tacked into the post his

body was draped against. His knees were bent and his back a mangled mess of flesh and blood and beneath him, white snow stained a deep, dark red. The people surrounding him weren't in focus, they were just a blur of imagery and color amongst Gale's beaten frame. "He has nightmares about me," Gale said softly as his finger stroked his painted back.

The floor creaked as he walked down the hall and headed for the stairs. Gale left the home of Katniss and Peeta Mellark just as he found it, leaving nothing unchanged except, perhaps, himself.

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The Capitol audience was stunned into silence until the first shriek of an overwrought viewer at the party began crying out Peeta's name. It was like a chain reaction amongst the crowd of people, giving them permission to allow their emotions to surface. As for the group of people sitting around the table reserved for the team from District Twelve there were a range of emotions.

Portia stared silently at the screen, her lips pressed together and tears dripping from her eyes.

Haymitch's hand immediately went under the table and searched out Effie's who was struggling to keep herself from joining the rest of the Capitol residents in their grieving. He saw the black hat perched on her gold wig, trembling; her teeth began to make a chattering noise and felt her fingers digging into his palm. He leaned over and whispered to her, "Breathe Effie. Just breathe."

Breathing wasn't an option for Effie Trinket at the moment. She had just witnessed one of the most horrific things she ever would in her

entire life. No, there was no blood, no battle, and no sign of starvation or infection. Other than the fact that he wasn't breathing, Peeta looked as healthy as a horse lying in the arena, but his death was devastating for Effie. She wanted to scream, to yell out, "Get up, damn it!" More than that she wanted to kill the man responsible for harming her sweet boy. Her lashes began to flutter unnaturally fast. Her throat felt as though Viggo were squeezing it. The back of her nose began to sting and keeping her emotions in check was the last thing she had cared about.

"Effie," Haymitch gave her hand a little tug. "Try to stay calm," he whispered again. He had just lost Peeta, he might lose Katniss. He sure as hell wasn't going to lose Effie too. "Christ, kid. Whatcha go and do that for?" Haymitch let his head fall into his free hand.

"Save him, Finnick," Annie's tiny voice squeaked from her spot between Portia and Effie. "You don't have long."

No one from the District Twelve team knew if Finnick had heard Annie's pleas, if they were on the same wavelength or if life was simply different in the district they lived in, but Finnick Odair stood up only a second later and began performing a life saving technique on Peeta.

"Will that work, Annie?" Portia asked through her tears.

The beautiful young woman nodded. "It can. If the damage isn't too great."

Effie's eyes met Haymitch's and together they willed Finnick's attempts to work. Around them the people of the Capitol began calling out to the tribute from District Four. Some of them knowing what he was up to and others completely oblivious to it.

"Why is he kissing him?"

"Save his life Finnick! You can do it!"

"I wouldn't save him; he'll only kill you later on!"

"What do you want to bet Finnick can't bring him back?"

"I'll take that bet!"

With each passing second Haymitch felt his heart sinking into his stomach. 'Don't do this, kid. The girl needs you.' Thoughts of Katniss trying to raise a kid on her own hurt the hell out of Haymitch. 'Come on back now. You've been down long enough.' He could feel both of Effie's hands clamped around his underneath their table and thought, 'Effie will die without you, kid. Don't you know how much she loves you? Come on, Peeta.' He slammed his fist down on the table as he yelled out, "COME ON!"

Portia dropped her head into her hand and began quietly sobbing, shaking her head back and forth. "Please," she begged no one in particular. "Please."

The first sound of Peeta's cough caused an eruption of hoots and cheers throughout the Capitol. The team from District Twelve jumped to their feet and began hugging one another.

Effie pulled Annie up from her chair and into a hug with the hope that Finnick Odair could somehow feel her gratitude being expressed.

"Thank you, darling," she spoke quietly to the young lady.

Sponsors began to approach Haymitch, all of them wanting to help Peeta in some way or another and the mentor was more than happy



to begin taking down their information. He knew exactly when he'd be sending in the first gift.

"Oh, my goodness," Portia gripped Effie around the shoulders, "that poor girl. What she must've been going through."

"I know," Effie gave Portia's hand a little pat, "but she'll be fine in no time. I have the utmost faith in Peeta. He'll know what to do for Katniss." And he did.

There were oohs and ahs as the audience watched what played out between the pair of not so star-crossed lovers and when Peeta cut off a large piece of moss and threw it over their heads to hide him and Katniss from viewing eyes, everyone knew what was going on beneath the piece of greenery.

"Go get 'em, Peeta!"

"Aren't they sweet?"

"He's such a gentleman."

By the time they took their seats, Effie and Haymitch both felt as though they had been on a rollercoaster ride to hell and back.

"Now all they need is some water," Haymitch rested his elbows on the table, which Effie smacked off.

"Manners, Haymitch!" She lifted her finger in the air and beckoned a member of the wait staff. "I think we should have a drink to celebrate." She turned to Annie, "Do you drink dear?" The girl shook her head. "Tea?" She nodded. Effie placed an order for the special drink the Capitol was serving that year in honor of the Quell and a cup of tea for Annie.

Haymitch began to complain the moment his drink was set down in front of him. "What the hell is this crap?"

"I think it's adorable." Effie lifted up the tall, brown glass filled with a clear concoction that tasted like fruit and garnished with candied leaves. "Why it looks like one of the trees in the arena." She sipped the drink from her straw. "It's quite tasty."

Haymitch threw his straw on the table and tried to drink straight from the glass, but the decorations poked him in the nose. "This is ridiculous. Where's that damn waiter? I want a glass of whiskey."

"You need to use your straw," Effie picked it up and placed it back in his glass.

"I don't like straws." Haymitch threw it back on the table.

"You don't like anything." She stabbed the straw through one of the garnishes and took a breath. "Oh." She pulled it out then placed it back in the glass again. "Haymitch. Look." She jabbed the straw into the glass one more time.

"Yeah. So what?" He wondered what was in the cocktail because Effie was acting like she had reached her limit. "What the hell is in this thing?" He tilted the glass and peered inside of it.

"I'm not sure, but it taste like fruit and resembles..." She arched her brow, "...water."

"Wa..." Haymitch began repeating Effie's actions with his straw, poking it in and out of the glass. A soft chuckle escaped from him. "Son of a bitch. They've been surrounded by it all day long."

"But are we sure?" She quietly asked.

"Don't know, but where else could it be? Let's give them a little while...see if they find any." They gave them a few hours then Haymitch noticed something about the strange creature Katniss had shot. "Look at the teeth on that thing." Effie smiled at Haymitch. "If I wasn't sure before, I am now. There's water in those trees, Effie."

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An overwhelming feeling of loss consumed Katniss to the depths of her soul. The first few tears were silent. Peeta was dead and she was certain she would follow suit simply from heartbreak. Life had changed so drastically in a matter of seconds. One minute she was bickering with him, smiling at him, kissing him, being teased by him and defending their lives, the next she was crouching over his lifeless body praying for her own life to end, for she couldn't imagine the thought of going on without him. A warning sounded off somewhere deep inside of her. The flame Peeta had said could never be extinguished began to ignite her spirit. "No." She lifted her head off of his chest and began to violently shake him as her heart started to race. "No! Wake up, damn you! WAKE UP!" But Peeta's head just kept bobbing lifelessly back and forth. "NOOO!" She was sure the sheer force of her love for him would bring him back.

"Move! Let me!" Finnick attempted to get to Peeta, but Katniss wouldn't let Peeta go. "MOVE!" Finnick pushed her backwards causing Katniss to fall on her buttocks, knocking the wind out of her. Then Finnick began unbuttoning Peeta's shirt, feeling certain spots in his neck, tilting it up so his chin pointed towards the sky.

Katniss' fingers began clawing for an arrow out of her sheath, intending on killing Finnick, thinking he might hurt Peeta further, not taking into account his current condition, but her violent sobs had

taken over her entire system and she couldn't seem to get a grip on one and when she did the arrow slipped from her grip into the dirt. She fumbled for it, pawing at the scratchy earth until finally getting a hold of her deadly weapon and took aim. It was then that she saw what the victor from District Four was doing. He wasn't trying to harm Peeta; he was trying to save him. Katniss watched as Finnick blew air into Peeta's lungs, and pumped at his chest. She recalled her mother performing such actions like, but it had never worked. The patients were always too far gone by the time her mom had to take these steps. This is why Katniss was certain Peeta would never return to her. She sucked in a huge mouthful of air, her throat was almost completely closed from the grief she was racked with, and her whole body was shaking as she watched Finnick furiously work at his task.

"Come on, Peeta," Finnick said while pushing against his chest with the palms of his hands.

Pump...pump...pump...pump...pump...breathe, then all over again. The hair was beginning to cling to Finnick's forehead from the sweat that had broken out. He could feel his own heart racing as he started the procedure over and over again. He wasn't sure how much longer Peeta's brain could go without oxygen, he had already been down for what seemed like an hour, but was only a couple of minutes. "Come on!" He slammed his fist into Peeta's chest and heard the boy begin to cough. Finnick fell back on his haunches and let out a breath as Peeta sucked one in.

Katniss buried her face in her hands; she could no longer watch the torturous events being played out in front of her. "Peeta?" Katniss whispered when she heard him choking. She stumbled her way to him on her hands and knees, dropping her bow and arrow into the mixture of dirt and sand beneath her legs. "Peeta." Her cheeks were drenched in tears, her nose streaming down her face. She reached out

tremulous fingers as she leaned over him and felt the warmth of his breath coming from between his lips.

Peeta's lashes fluttered, blue eyes met silver ones. "Be careful. There's a force field up ahead."

"Th..aaht's...noht...fuhneee," Katniss' sobs became uncontrollable. Once again she buried her face in her hands, horrible choking noises escaped from between her parted lips as she slowly rocked back and forth.

"Hey," Peeta's voice was soft and comforting. He sat up and wrapped his arms around her quivering body. "I'm all right. Just a little shaken up, that's all."

"You were dead!" She yelled out. "Your heart stopped beating!" She threw her arms around his neck. "It stopped. It...stoh...ohpped."

"Well, it's beating now," he rubbed the back of her head and held her to him. "Shhh...I'm okay. Stop, Katniss. I'm fine."

The whole situation was ridiculous to Katniss. Peeta had been the one who was brought back to life, yet he sat there comforting her. This in itself brought on another round of histrionics. In her entire life she had never cried so hard. She kept telling herself that Peeta was alive, he was back and in her arms, but it didn't seem to matter. She began rambling the stupidest things in his ear and for the life of her, she couldn't explain it. "Don't do that again. If you promise not to do that, I'll let you win the next fight...the next two fights. You can call me sweetheart. I'll do the laundry and pick up after myself. I swear it. I swear I'll do it, Peeta. Just don't die on me again. Don't do it." She squeezed him even harder and wiped her dripping nose on her sleeve.

"Katniss, you need to calm down," he placed a tender kiss against her head. "Please stop crying."

"It's the hormones," Finnick was still trying to catch his breath from the exertion of the heat...carrying Mags...most definitely from bringing Peeta back from the dead.

"Yeah, I know." Peeta stroked Katniss' back. "She'll probably start yelling at me any second now."

Katniss looked him in the face and hollered, "I will not!"

Peeta gave her a little smile and said, "Okay, you won't yell at me, but will you stop crying now?"

"Yes," but Peeta's appeal only brought on another round of tears from her. It was a simple request, but he had asked her to do it and she didn't think she'd ever hear the sound of his voice again.

Peeta was at a loss. He didn't know what to do to help Katniss get through this. Trying to put himself in her position was ridiculously painful, but he understood where she was coming from. He remembered what it was like seeing her lie in a pool of her own blood last year and wondering if she'd ever wake up again. Death had knocked on their door one too many times, and there was no avoiding it for him this year, she would have to come to grips with it, but this wasn't the time for that. "Shh," he whispered, placing a kiss against the side of her head. "I'm okay now. I'm right here."

"You can't leave me, Peeta." She began placing frantic kisses anywhere her lips could reach him. "I love you. You're not allowed to leave me."

He stroked her back, her arms, her head. "Please, Katniss. Calm down." She felt like ice. "You're shaking." There was only one way to help Katniss through difficult moments such as these. He looked up and saw Mags holding out a piece of moss to him. "Come here," he tilted Katniss' face up and wiped her nose with it. "Blow your nose." He gave it to her then wiped the rest of her tears away with the edges of his sleeves. When her face was clean he tossed the piece of moss to the side and said, "Give me your hands." He placed one against her heart which was racing uncontrollably. "What do you feel, Katniss?"

"My heartbeat," she said softly between her cries.

He placed her other hand against his chest. "What do you feel?"

"Your heart..." she began to choke on the words, "...your heartbeat."

"That's right. Just feel my heart beating with yours." Peeta rested his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes. "Can you feel that, Katniss? Feel the way our hearts beat together?" Hers began to slow down some. "It's like they match rhythms. They drum in time with one another." He rubbed the back of her hands with his thumbs and whispered, "Let yourself feel it. Feel them beating together." Peeta could hear her breathing returning to normal and her pulse returning to a steady rate. "That's you and me, Katniss. As long as one of our hearts beat, so does the other. They're one in the same." He gave her a soft kiss against her lips and asked her, "Feel better now...sweetheart?" He placed a kiss on the tip of her nose and saw her grin.

"Yes." She hugged him close to her and said, "That's the only time I'm going to let you call me that without complaining," in a gentle tone. "I love you. You scared the hell out of me, you know?"

"Sorry." He brushed his cheek against hers. "I love you too."

"Peeta, think you can walk?" Finnick asked.

"No, he should rest." Katniss became immediately protective over him.

"Want to make camp here then?" Finnick looked around like he'd rather not.

"I don't really think that's an option," Peeta said. "Katniss, I'll be fine. If we move slowly...I shouldn't have any problems, but staying here with no water...no protection...I just don't think that's very smart."

"Okay." It had been a hell of a day. She had seen Cinna being beaten to a pulp, watched Peeta die and be brought back to life and was thrown into the arena. "Give me a second to get my bow and arrows." She really needed some time to get her bearings together.

"Up you go," Finnick put his arm under Peeta's and hauled him to his feet. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah." Peeta felt a bit lightheaded once he got to his feet and gripped onto the back of Finnick's bodysuit to keep from falling. He flashed his eyes to his fellow tribute and gave him a shake of his head then held up a finger asking for a second. Once he felt the head rush pass he gave Finnick a pat on the back and stood on his own.

Katniss hated what she was about to suggest, but she couldn't risk Peeta's life again and Finnick... 'How am I supposed to kill off the man that has saved my entire family in the span of a few hours?' She silently asked herself. At this point the best she could hope for was that a Career would take him out for her. She slung her bow and arrows over her shoulder and walked up to Peeta. "I'm going to take the lead." She waited for the fight.

"No way."



"Let her," Finnick interrupted it before it even began. "You knew there was a force field before Peeta got there, didn't you?" He gave her a questioning look. "She tried to call out a warning to you, Peeta."

"I'm still not letting her take the lead." There was no way in hell he was taking that kind of chance.

"How'd you know it was there?" Finnick asked her.

For some reason, giving away the knowledge Beetee and Wiress had shared with her didn't seem too smart to share with the Capitol. "I could hear it."

Peeta immediately knew she was lying.

"Hear it?" Finnick asked.

"Yup," there was no way she could fool Peeta, but she sure hoped he played along.

"Not with that ear they fixed at the Capitol?" He asked.

'Peeta Mellark, I love you!' Katniss' mind was reeling. "Mmmm hmmm," she nodded.

"I swear, Finnick, this woman can hear the wings of a butterfly," Peeta put his arm around Katniss' waist and kissed her cheek. "I still don't want you leading our group though."

If anyone else took the front they risked the chance of dying. Katniss wasn't going to argue with Peeta so she opted for logic and reasoning. "Makes sense. You think it's too dangerous...so do I, but I won't walk into it like the rest of you will."

Peeta was using a very sweet tone of voice, "And if you don't hear it in time?" There was no way she could hear the damn thing.

"Oh, I will," she gave him the nicest smile she had ever given anyone in her life. Reasoning wasn't working, neither was logic.

"But Katniss..." Peeta stepped closer to her and matched her smile, "...there's always a chance that you won't." He tapped her on the tip of her nose with his finger. "Besides, you said I could win the next two arguments."

"I'm not arguing with you, Peeta," she smiled.

"Give us a moment." Peeta took her hand and wished he had a sleeping bag to pull over their heads so they could talk in private. Katniss was keeping something from him, but he didn't know what. He looked up and thought, 'Well, it's not a sleeping bag, but it'll get the job done.' He sliced off a large section of moss and turned to Finnick and Mags. "She's going to have to do some convincing if she's going to take the lead." Then draped it over their heads. He ran his hands up her back and she placed hers on his waist. The moss was thick enough for the Capitol's cameras not to see through, but thin enough to let rays of light in. Peeta moved his lips, "What's up?"

"I can see the force field," Katniss moved hers back and trailed her fingers up Peeta's back.

"See it?"

"Yes. Beetee and Wiress taught me how. I'll show you later."

"Is it safe for you to lead?"

"Yes or else I wouldn't do it."

Peeta gave her a tiny grin. "Okay. Now you have to kiss me because they think that's what we're doing under here."

Though their hands had looked like they were enjoying themselves the entire time underneath the guise of the soft piece of moss, Katniss and Peeta had discovered a way to communicate without the Capitol's knowledge and to them this was the best weapon they had within the arena.

Their kiss had barely started before Finnick pulled the thing off of them. "She convince you yet, Peeta?"

He let his head drop back and said, "Yeah. She did."

"Et's oh," Mags called out from her spot against a tree.

Weapons were gathered and checked over; Mags insisted on walking since they were taking it slow and prior to leaving, Katniss headed straight for Peeta and gripped both of his cheeks in her hands. "Do not die on me," she ordered before planting a very hard kiss against his lips. "I swear if you die, I'll kill you myself."

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As Gale headed home he noticed the rejuvenated mood around his district. He picked up bits and pieces of conversation as he walked by a few people, but nothing that would tell him what was going on.

"Hey," he opened his front door and walked into the living room to see Peeta talking to Katniss. "What?" Gale turned to look at his mother. "I thought he was dead."

"He was, but Finnick saved him," she said. "Didn't you watch it?"

"Not..." his legs were about to buckle. Seeing Peeta on the television screen was like looking into the face of a ghost. "Not the whole thing. I left right after he died...I couldn't..." His body collapsed into a chair. "Geez. Is he okay?"

"Seems to be," Hazelle gave Gale a strange look. "Are you?"

"Me? Um...yeah." The sound of Peeta and Katniss laughing amongst themselves caught Gale's attention. "Holy crap. He's alive." Gale put both of his hands on his head in disbelief. He had told himself when he left Peeta's house that it was better this way, that Katniss was going to have to lose him in the arena and if she was going to watch him die, better a bloodless death than a brutal one, but it didn't make him feel any better. Guilt had flooded through him the moment he left the Mellark home. Gale found himself in the same situation he had been in during the last Games only this time it was worse. After seeing the sketch that Peeta had drawn, Gale was filled with jealousy and realized that his love for Katniss was as strong as ever, but then he saw the painting of himself and was now back to questioning Peeta again. Would life have been easier if the baker's son had never come into it? He thought so. Would Gale and Katniss had stood a chance at the kind of love Peeta and she shared? Gale had no clue. He wasn't sure he'd ever find someone to look at him the way they were looking at each other in the picture. As far as his friendship with the guy went, he still didn't trust him. Not completely. There were just too many things left unanswered. Too many secrets kept between Katniss and Peeta.

"You realize I'm never going to cook for you again, Peeta Mellark," Katniss picked at some food on a stick.

"Don't do that. I love your grilled cheese sandwiches." He smiled at Katniss.

"I do make a good grilled cheese."

"And you can roast any vegetable known to man," Peeta pulled her closer to him.

"True. Whereas you can't identify most of them," Katniss teased him.

Gale watched the duo converse back and forth on the television screen. Their easy going banter seemed to flow so naturally it was difficult for him to view.

"Yes, but I can roast a chicken," Peeta laughed and Katniss glared at him.

"You just can't let it go, can you?" She scooted between his legs and rested her head against his shoulder.

Peeta kissed her temple. "Come on, Katniss. You have to admit. That was funny."

"What happened to the chicken?" Finnick moved closer to the pair as did Mags. Gale had to admit his curiosity was peaked as well.

"Can I tell him?" Peeta grinned.

"Yes," she said between a sigh.

Peeta let out a little, "Heh heh," noise and began. "It was a few weeks before Reaping Day. We had finished up some training with my friend, Gale..." Hearing Peeta call him a friend was like taking a punch to the stomach for Gale.

"My cousin," Katniss interjected. "I walked him home, but came back early because it started to rain and I thought I'd be nice and make

Peeta dinner." Katniss lifted the corner of her mouth in a playful grin. "A rare thing for me."

"Cooking?" Finnick asked.

"No." Katniss answered. "Being nice." Gale smirked and thought, 'You do have your moments, Catnip.'

"You're always nice to me," Peeta gave her a kiss on the cheek. "So Katniss decided that we were having chicken for dinner, but she had never used the type of ovens that are in the victor's houses before. Only the stove tops."

"I was used to coal ovens," she defended herself.

"I know," Peeta stroked her arms. "It took me a few tries before getting the hang of that oven too."

"There couldn't be much difference between the two types of ovens, right?" Katniss asked Finnick. "They both cook with fire."

"But Katniss didn't realize how much the temperature for the oven would differ from that of a coal based one," Peeta continued the story. "So she got the chicken ready..."

"I even called my mom up and asked her what type of herbs I could use on it to make it taste good." Katniss shook her head. "I should've asked her how to work that damn thing."

"What did you do?" Finnick looked like he was on the edge of his seat and Gale most certainly was.

"There I was, the chicken all doctored up with herbs and seasonings, the vegetables lining the sides of the pan and Peeta comes into the kitchen offering to help me."

"Which she didn't accept," Peeta added.

"Nope. I kicked him out." Katniss stuck her legs out in front of her. "Now I figure, I've roasted tons of game before, so all I have to do is turn up the flame like a fire and cook the chicken and vegetables the same way. I open the oven, turn up the temperature and put in the chicken."

"I asked her how long until dinner would be ready and she said, 'we've got about two hours to kill,' so we..." Katniss jabbed Peeta in the stomach with her elbow. "We...uh...killed some time, but about an hour and a half later I smell something burning. The kitchen was full of smoke."

"The whole house smelled like it was on fire and there were flames shooting out of the oven door," Katniss tried to hold in her laughter.

Peeta started to chuckle and then his laughter bellowed out. "Katniss decided to open up the oven and the chicken..."

"Which was on fire..." Katniss was giggling.

"Flew out of the oven and across the kitchen floor." Peeta said between his laughter.

Both Finnick and Mags joined in their amusement. Gale and his family all started to laugh along with them.

"I can just see her doing that," Gale said.

"It's not my fault." Katniss' smile lit up the screen. "It was that damn oven."

"But wait, that's not even the best part," Peeta's laughter seemed uncontrollable.

Katniss practically glared at him. "Don't you dare."

Gale had tears in his eyes as he listened to Katniss and Peeta regale Finnick and Mags with their story. He tried to imagine the image of Katniss' prank on her mentor and chuckled. "Bet Haymitch was pissed about that?" Gale said to his mother.

"Oh, Haymitch barely notices a thing around his house. He probably forgot about it within an hour." She flailed a hand in the air and smiled. "Those two," she pointed to the television set at Katniss and Peeta, "are quite the pair, aren't they?" Hazelle sighed. "Wasn't sure what was going to happen to that girl when she lost him today. Reminded me of her mother after the explosion."

"...damn good...even if it was sopping wet," Peeta smiled. "Thanks, Hazelle," he said up to the sky.

"You're welcome, Peeta," Hazelle answered. "Speaking of...I better get dinner going."

'Is that what will happen to you, Catnip?' Gale wondered. 'Would you turn into your mother?' He truly hoped not, but if she did come back to Twelve in that condition, Gale was ready to help her through the pain.

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"But wait," Peeta held out his hand, "that's not even the best part."

"Don't you dare," Katniss turned around and gave Peeta a stern warning.

"I have to. I just have to." Peeta was holding his stomach. "We were starving so Katniss decides to..." he couldn't stop laughing, "...to



sneak into Haymitch's house and...she knows he's probably passed out so she sneaks in and finds the dinner that Hazelle made for him and...swaps the burnt chicken for his dinner. Mind you, she's already dressed for bed. I look out the front door and here's Katniss running through the rain in an oversized nightshirt, bare feet, wet hair hanging in her face carrying a huge platter of roast beef. And...and Haymitch," Peeta almost snorted, "...wearing nothing but his training shirt, one sock and some underwear, waving his fist and yelling at her from his front door."

Finnick was laughing so hard his face was beat red.

"What?" Katniss feigned innocence. "I left him a plate of food," she said with an evil grin. "The old man caught me right as I was leaving too. If I hadn't had dropped that knife into his sink I would've been home free."

"The question here," Finnick asked when his laughter died down, "is how the roast was?"

"Gooooood," Katniss rubbed her stomach.

"Really good...damn good...even if it was sopping wet." Peeta quietly called up to the camera, "Thank you, Hazelle."

Everyone at the Capitol's party was laughing, teasing Haymitch after hearing Katniss and Peeta tell Finnick and Mags about stealing the man's dinner.

"Do you even remember that, Haymitch?" Effie asked him.

"Hell yeah. Friggin' girl snuck in my window while I was asleep on the couch." He tried not to laugh at the memory of it. "She's right though, I wouldn't have heard her if she didn't drop that knife."

"I can't believe you were sober enough to wake up," Effie said snidely.

"I'll have you know, I didn't have one drink while I was in training. Not one." he pointed at her. "I was just tired that night. It was a long day...and the girl did make me a plate of food before she took off," he defended Katniss. "Probably would've thrown the rest away. What am I gonna do with all that meat?"

"Yes," Effie sipped her drink, "goodness knows eating it would be out of the question. Why whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Smart I like, Effie. Smart ass, I don't," Haymitch replied dryly. The sound of Annie's giggle caused Haymitch to give Effie a little jab with his elbow. "She thinks I'm funny."

"Funny looking perhaps," Effie sipped again.

"It's going to be night soon," Portia let out a little sigh. "Wonder whose left?"

"Johanna got one of the Careers, but the others are still out there. Seeder's gone. Guy from Five and Six, both from Eight and Nine." Haymitch answered. "Eight of 'em gone today."

"Considering years past, that's not bad." Effie knew it sounded stupid, but she was willing to say anything that might help. "I remember a year where only four were gone on the first day."

The Capitol played the anthem and began to flash the images into the sky of the deceased. "Where's that little computer?" Haymitch smacked at his pockets.

Effie reached into his jacket and pulled it out. "Here. Now it works exactly like the large one."

"Yeah...yeah...quit pestering me." He pushed some buttons and sent in a gift for Peeta. "There ya go, kid. Glad your face wasn't in the sky tonight."

"It's a shame you can't attach notes with that, Haymitch," Portia said. "Any reason why they won't allow you to do that?"

"Not sure, but we were told only gifts this year. No messages. They're gonna have to figure out how to use that thing on their own."

"They're all victors," Annie said quietly.

"What's that dear?" Effie asked.

"They're victors. They already won the Games. Why would they make it any easier for them in the arena?"

"It's getting so late," Effie said with a hint of panic in her voice over Annie's observation. "Why don't we retire for the evening? Might I suggest we share a suite?" Haymitch and Effie had both agreed not to let Annie out of their site during the Games and now that Portia was back, she was staying close at hand as well.

"Sounds good to me," Haymitch stood up. "Let's go." As they left the party Haymitch was stopped a few times as was Skip, the mentor for District Four, by sponsors. Both men took all the information they needed and escorted the women back to the District Twelve suite for the night.

Effie and Portia worked like crazy to get Annie into bed, Portia sat with her until she fell asleep. None of them wanted the woman to be up at the stroke of midnight when the Games really began.

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They had been heading uphill since early morning and found no signs of water. Now that Katniss was leading their group, she thought it best to throw a nut from a bushel she had found hanging, into the force field every few feet in front of her. Just because she could see the chink in the armor, didn't mean there was a chink to see. She had scolded Mags for eating the nuts and looked to Finnick for help, but he was useless. The man just laughed it off.

"This is useless," Peeta's voice was weary. "I feel like we've been traveling the same path for over an hour now."

"I tend to agree with you," Finnick put a hand on Mags' shoulder. "Let's take a break."

"Peeta," Katniss could see the exhaustion in his eyes. "Sit down." She took a look around and said, "I think I better get a look from above again." Peeta's eyes just lifted to hers. "Finnick, will you stand under me...keep your hands out? I won't go high."

"Sure." He glanced down at Peeta and wondered if there would be another argument.

It was either that or dehydrate, either way Katniss was putting herself in danger. "Not too high?"

"I swear," she bent down in front of him and kissed his forehead. "I'm so thirsty."

"Me too." He brushed the hair away from her forehead. "Be careful."

Katniss walked side by side with Finnick to a tree that appeared to have sturdy branches. "Thanks," she mumbled.

"No problem. You're doing me and Mags a favor. We need water too."

"That's not what I mean," He had saved Peeta's life and for that she would be eternally grateful. Katniss put her foot against the rubbery bark. "Thanks."

Finnick gave her a nod of understanding and watched her as she scampered up the tree. He wondered why she shot an arrow into the pink sky and then saw a flash of white clouds floating in the blue sky behind the arena. That's when he figured out that Katniss could see the force field. He held onto her waist once she got within reaching distance and lifted her onto the ground. "So?"

"Let's wait till we get back and I'll explain," Katniss suggested. She took a seat next to Peeta and held his hand. "The arena is a perfect circle...a dome really. It's not very big."

"It looks like a cake to me," Peeta added. "With the wedges and everything."

"Yup, the wedges lead up to the Cornucopia which is sitting on top of a wheel." Katniss explained the diagram of the arena. "As far as I can tell, the only large body of water is the ocean where we started the Games."

"There has to be a source of water somewhere otherwise we'll all be dead in a matter of days," Peeta frowned.

"No fun in that," Finnick said under his breath.

"The foliage is thick. Maybe there are ponds or springs, but there's nothing up that hill, so no sense traveling that way," Katniss pointed in the direction they were going.

"There's got to be drinkable water between the force field and the wheel," Peeta said it with regret in his voice.

"I think we all know what that means," Finnick looked at Mags. "We've got to head back down."

"Back towards the Careers," Peeta said sorrowfully "and..." he squeezed Katniss' hand, "I'm in no shape to face them right now." He hated admitting how defeated he felt, but his brush with death left him weakened.

"Can you travel a few hundred yards?" Finnick asked. "Maybe we can circle around that area, see if there's a spring or something?"

"Yeah." Peeta stood up holding onto Katniss' hand. "Be careful up there, okay?"

She nodded at him and gave him a quick kiss. "We'll find it soon. Don't worry."

Peeta walked behind Finnick who had thrown Mags over his shoulder once again. He couldn't help but smile at the elderly woman who was grinning at him from her spot over the muscular man's shoulder. He wished he had access to his paints and brushes. He'd capture the moment on a canvas. For a moment the woman looked so carefree and full of spunk.

When they finally stopped Katniss knew she had to do something to get nutrition into her system. "Peeta?" She knelt in front of him. "I need to go hunting."

"Okay," he started to rise but she stopped him with her hand.

"No, Peeta. You know you can't come with me." He was way too loud and scared off the game. "I need to go by myself."

"I'm not too thrilled about that," Finnick said as he began working with some of the leaves he pulled from a nearby tree.

Mags shook her head, "Nup."

"Mags doesn't like the idea either," Peeta said quietly. "I think we all know how I feel about this."

"Don't think I'm too thrilled with it either, but...I haven't eaten, Peeta." She didn't know how to tell him about the breakfast she was served that morning without thinking about Cinna and thinking about Cinna would bring on tears, which she couldn't afford. Crying was a good way of wasting the much needed fluids her body craved. "We need food."

Peeta understood what she was saying when she said, "we." Now he knew that Katniss had gone since the night before without a full meal and it infuriated him. "Where will you go?"

"Not far. I'll try to stay as close as possible and I swear I won't climb any trees." Katniss knew it took a lot for Peeta to let her leave their campsite alone.

He walked her about twenty yards away and held her hands in his. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go, but I have to." She closed her eyes when she felt his hand trail down her braid. "I'll be back soon."

Peeta's heart ached when she placed her palm against it. "I'm going to look for you if you're not back in thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes," Katniss kissed his cheek. "In the meantime, rest."

Finnick sat with Mags who was weaving a bowl like it was second nature. "Don't know how they're doing it. I'd go crazy if that were me," he lifted his chin towards Peeta who was walking up to them. "You sure she'll be okay out there?"

"Yeah," Peeta sat down looking completely forlorn. "I'd rather not talk about it though. It drives me crazy her being in here."

"How far along is she?" Finnick asked him as he cut away at some thin tree branches.

"Don't really know." Peeta shrugged and took some nuts from Mags' hand. "We just found out. If I had to guess, I'd say somewhere between five and seven weeks." He began tossing the nuts into the force field to remove the shells. "She suffers from morning sickness, so she didn't eat anything today."

"Nothing?" Finnick's brows shot up. "That's not good. Did she drink?"

"Oh, I'm sure she did. She was pretty close to dehydration last year."

Finnick nodded, "I remember. She kicked butt in those Games though."

The corner of Peeta's mouth lifted in a grin. "Yeah she did. She's amazing." Mags gave him a nod. "She can't cook, so...let's hope whatever she brings back we can eat raw."

"Who cooks at your house?" Finnick asked.

"We both do, but she mainly makes breakfast and lunches. Dinners..." Peeta smiled. "Well, I'll wait till Katniss gets back before I get into that conversation."



Mags handed Peeta the bowl she had finished and motioned for him to put the shelled nuts into them. The first sound of the cannon firing shook them all to the core.

"Katniss," Peeta stood up and looked towards the direction she headed. The second cannon fired, then another and it continued until eight shots were fired. Peeta sunk back down to the ground.

"Bloodbath is over," Finnick said quietly. "Wonder who survived."

Peeta shook his head; he was suddenly terrified over Katniss being alone in the jungle. "I should go look for her."

"Give her a few minutes more." Finnick suggested. "We don't need both of you out there by yourselves."

Katniss listened to the cannon and collapsed against a tree, slowly sliding down to her knees. The sound alone had been the source of many a nightmare. "Peeta," she breathed his name out after the first shot fired. She wished she had brought him with her after all. Being in the arena without him, even for a short period of time, left her feeling naked and vulnerable. It was then that she saw the strange creatures crawling around the ground and followed the path of one as it headed up a tree. After she killed it, she studied it and noticed the wet muzzle and its sharp, pointy teeth. "Where'd you get the water from?" She searched for a few more minutes before skinning and gutting the plump rodent, her stomach churning the entire time. It wasn't until she had completely finished cleaning the animal that the full effects of pregnancy hit her. "Oh, no." She stood up and turned her head behind a tree. Since she hadn't had anything to eat or drink there was nothing to come up, but the dry heaves had her entire body quaking. When it was over she picked up the rat like animal by its tail and dragged herself back to the campsite feeling spent and worthless. Peeta was a sight for sore eyes. "Hey," she lifted up her kill. "You decorated."

"Yeah," Peeta took the animal out of her hand and helped her sit down underneath the little three sided hut Finnick had built for them.

"Katniss," he removed the bow and arrows from her shoulder, "are you okay?"

"Cleaning him didn't sit too well with me." Katniss felt horrible. Not just physically, but emotionally. Who would want to sponsor someone that couldn't even stand the smell of animal blood? Maybe some pregnant woman would take pity on her, but she seriously doubted it.

"You need food and water," Peeta was furious with Haymitch for not sending at least Katniss something to drink.

Finnick glanced down at Katniss and asked, "Do we have to cook this thing? It's safe to eat, right?"

"I think so...I mean it looks okay," Katniss was laying on the large piece of moss they had cut and placed down as a matt. "But we definitely have to cook it."

"Don't think we should light a fire," Finnick picked up the strange looking meat and examined it.

"Cut a chunk of that off for me, Finnick." Peeta stroked Katniss' hair. "I've got an idea." He stuck a small piece of it onto a stick and threw it into the force field.

"Hey! Look at that!" Finnick called out. Mags started clapping her hands and Katniss smiled. "Whoops," Finnick said softer. "Probably shouldn't be so loud."

Peeta broke open the meat; it was charred on the outside, but cooked on the inside. "Can you eat something?" He asked Katniss.

"Sounds stupid, but yeah."

"Why does that sound stupid?" Finnick asked.

"Because I just puked," she pulled the meat off the stick and devoured it. "It's burnt to a crisp, but I don't care."

"Reminds me of that time you tried to make me dinner." Peeta grinned at her and began preparing sticks of meat. "That was quite a night."

"Pretty fun too," Katniss nibbled on a handful of nuts. "These are really good."

"She eats a lot." Peeta looked at her. "Tomorrow you'll have to shoot a few of these things so you'll have plenty to eat."

"If we get closer to the ocean, Mags and I will get us some fish." Finnick smiled at Mags and ate some of his meat. "We'll stuff you till you're full, Katniss."

They sat around and enjoyed each other's company until the talk of Katniss' burning Peeta's dinner came up and they told Finnick and Mags about the adventure they shared in their home in Victor's Village. They laughed, not thinking about the noise they were making, and forgot for a little while that they were in the midst of the Games.

Watching the sunset had always been an enjoyable event for Katniss and Peeta, but not while they were in the arena. For the setting of the sun meant that night would fall and with the gloomy sky came the hunt. The seal of their nation shone above followed by the anthem as the four of them sat side by side and watched the different faces come into view. It was hard on all of them seeing their friends' images shine overhead, signaling the end of their time on earth, but none of them could afford to shed any tears. Peeta and Katniss just held hands and

tried not to let it get to them. The silver parachute floated down and landed at Peeta's feet just as Seeder's image vanished. They all stared at it, none of them moving for it.

"Who do you think it's for?" Katniss asked.

There was a humble sincerity in Finnick's voice when he said, "I think it's Peeta's...since he died today."

"Open it," Katniss encouraged him.

No one knew what the little silver tube with a lip on one end was. From hand to hand it was passed, examined, blown like a whistle, looked through, Finnick even put it on his pinky, yet none of them had a clue what to do with the thing.

"I'll take first watch," Finnick sat with his trident outside of their little shelter.

"G'night Mags," Peeta said to the woman who curled up against the back wall. He lay down on his side and Katniss took her nightly position facing him. "Feel better now that you've eaten?"

"Much." The little silver tube was in her hand. "Any clue what this thing is?"

"Nope, but I'm sure you'll figure it out," Peeta stroked her hair. "You've just got to stop thinking about it."

"I'm afraid of what I'll think of if I let myself." She closed her eyes. "All I keep seeing is you laying there...you weren't moving...you were just..."

"Stop," Peeta placed a soft kiss against her lips. "I'm okay and I'm not going anywhere right now." Katniss tucked her head under Peeta's

chin. "Know what you need to do? You need to clear your head. Think happy thoughts."

"Yeah, I'm overflowing with them out here."

"That's my point." he kissed the top of her head. "If you dwell on all that we've been through today you'll go crazy." He lifted her chin so she could face him. "What makes you happy, Katniss?"

She loved it when he did this for her. "You," she twirled his fingers around her hair.

"Now it's my turn to tell you what makes me happy." Peeta trailed his hand between them. "Both of you." He let his hand rest on her hip. "Now tell me something else that makes you happy."

"This is new."

"Yeah, we're going to take turns telling each other little things that make us happy. It'll help." He rested his forehead against hers. "Trust me. Now it's your turn."

"Okay," she was willing to give it a shot. "Prim."

"Too easy, but okay." He grinned. "Hearing you sing."

She bit the corner of her lip. "Watching you sketch."

"Sketching you."

"The scent of cinnamon," she gave him a shy smile.

"Having a picnic under an oak tree on a winter's day."

"That's a good one." Katniss loved having lunch with him when they were in school, even in the dead of winter.

"I thought so," he said proudly. "Try and beat that."

"Hmmm... sharing French toast with you on a rooftop and not having a care in the world."

"Ooooh, the French toast with the District Seven bread?" Peeta asked.

"Yeah," Katniss' mouth was beginning to water.

"Drenched in maple syrup." Peeta licked his lips.

"Ever have fresh maple syrup?"

"Like...from an actual maple tree?" Peeta's brows rose.

"Mmmm hmmm," Katniss brushed her nose against his. His naivety about such basic things warmed her heart.

"Can't say that I have, but it sounds good."

"Oh, it is, Peeta. We'd make it. My dad used to take me out and tap a tree..."

"Tap a tree?" Peeta asked. It sounded simple to her, but to him, it was something new and exciting. "How do you do that?"

"With a spile. You put it..."

"What's a spile?"

Katniss lifted her finger and wiggled the tube. "One of these. It works like a faucet so you can get sap from a tree. You tap a tiny hole into th..." She shot up. "It's a spile!"

"Yeah, but these aren't maple trees." Peeta sat up and met Katniss' excited expression. "Holy cow. It's in the trees."

Katniss shook Mags awake and held up the spile. "Water," was all she said. The old woman eagerly followed them. "Come on Finnick. Bring the awl." She taught them how to open a hole in the tree and shoved the spile into it. The four of them stepped back, staring at the tiny opening of the tube, eagerly awaiting the first sign of drinkable water. One little droplet escaped and Katniss caught it on her fingertip. She sucked it off and her whole face lit up. "It's water." They quietly cheered the discovery and filled bowl after bowl that Mags had weaved, drinking until their bodily fluids were replenished.

Peeta took hold of Katniss' by the face and said, "Remember when I told you your freckles were my favorite feature?" She nodded. "I was so, so wrong. It's your brain." He kissed her forehead. "Definitely your brain."

Finnick resumed his post at the front of their shelter. Mags fell asleep within seconds of laying her head down. Peeta lay on his back and Katniss, who had tied the spile to her belt, lay her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his beating heart as he slept. She closed her eyes, sure she'd never be able to sleep, and opened her eyes when she heard the toll of the first bell. "What is that?" She scampered alongside of Finnick who just shrugged as they listened until the loud ringing stopped.

"I counted twelve," Finnick stifled a yawn.

Katniss nodded. "Mean anything, you think?"

"No idea."

They sat and waited to see if anything further would happen, but the only thing that appeared was a flash of lightning splitting the sky and striking a lofty tree. The bolts of the electricity lit up the dark arena like strobes of light. "It's probably just a storm so the other tributes can get some water."

"Too bad they don't have a mentor as smart as Haymitch," Finnick stretched his aching muscles.

"How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours." He gestured towards Peeta. "Thought he could use the rest after the day he had, and you looked pretty beat too."

"No...I mean, yes. I was. It's my turn to keep watch now. Go to sleep, Finnick." She could see the hesitation in his eyes. "No one can stay awake forever and I'd rather Peeta sleep," Katniss placed a kiss on Peeta's forehead, took her bow and arrows and sat at the edge of the hut. Finnick left several bowls of water for her to drink so she wouldn't have to go into the jungle as well as some nuts. She popped a couple into her mouth and thought about the dinner they all shared earlier in the night. There was so much of that story that she and Peeta had left out. No one in their group knew that they had barely spoken to each other prior to that night unless it pertained to training for the Games. Up until late that afternoon, Peeta had fought against being her husband and turned into Katniss' drill sergeant, but they had made up and Katniss tried her best to do something sweet for Peeta. Too bad it turned into a disaster. She smiled when she thought of the fiery chicken dinner and getting caught by her mentor as she snuck into his kitchen to pilfer some leftovers.

*Her hair was still damp from running through the rain with the pan of beef and her nightshirt had plenty of wet spots remaining, but she didn't care. She was sharing dinner with Peeta, they were*



*smiling...laughing. Life was good again no matter where they were headed in just under a month. The scent of singed poultry still lingered in the air regardless of Peeta's attempts of cleaning up the mess.*

*"Think this kitchen will ever smell normal again?" Katniss ate the last bite of the crusty roll Peeta had baked early that morning.*

*"I'll make a cake or something so the house will smell good again. Of course, I'll have to give that oven a good cleaning first." Peeta glanced towards it. "I tried to wipe it out, but it was still too hot."*

*"I didn't ruin it, did I?" They'd have to get a new one if she did and then she remembered that they would be leaving their home and may never return to it.*

*"Nah. Those things are pretty durable. Can't say the same for that chicken though," Peeta chuckled.*

*"Ugh," Katniss hung her head in her hand and hid her smile. "I'm going to have to make that up to you."*

*"You did swipe Haymitch's dinner for me."*

*"Yeah, but that's kind of like cheating to win." She shrugged. "Hazelle made it and really...Haymitch would've brought it over tomorrow anyway."*

*"You finished eating?"*

*"Mmmm hmmm," Katniss nodded.*

*"Come on," Peeta held his hand out to her and led her to their bedroom. "I know exactly how you're going to make this up to me."*

*"Oh really?" Katniss' grinned.*

*"Yup," Peeta began unbuttoning her wet shirt. "You're going to pose for me."*

*"Pose?" Her face twisted. "You want me to sit for a picture?"*

*"Not sit," Peeta threw her wet garment on the floor. "Lie." He lifted her up and placed her on the bed. "I want to sketch you...us actually."*

*"Like..." Katniss looked down at herself, "Like this?" She yanked the sheet up. "No way. What if someone sees it?"*

*"No one will see it and yes, like that." Peeta stripped down to his boxers and joined her after moving their full length mirror to the edge of the bed and tilting it downwards. "Come here," he pulled her against him and arranged the sheets so it covered the bottom parts of their bodies, but their legs stuck out. "Move closer to me."*

*Katniss couldn't help but notice the look Peeta had in his eyes. The intensity that said he was hard at work, getting his picture just right in his mind before putting it down on paper. "Why do you want a picture like this?"*

*"Because we're beautiful together...at least I think we are." he looked at her. "Don't you think we are?"*

*"I suppose we could be." She could feel herself blushing. "You're beautiful."*

*"You're stunning...the thing is, you don't even know how lovely you are. The little things about you that make you so special." He gave her a loving smile. "To me...you're what art is all about. Trying to capture the inner beauty of someone that radiates out. Guess that's why I want to sketch us like this." Peeta rested his forehead against hers. "I'm trying to capture that emotion on paper."*

*There was no argument she could make. No argument she wanted to make. She allowed him to move her hands, tilt her head, bend her knee... He moved the mirror around the bed once so he could see his own facial expressions until it was finally time to create his work of art. Katniss watched the intensity smoldering in his bright blue eyes and how they changed from sky blue to a stormy summer sky. She glanced at the picture he was drawing, to her it looked like shades of gray, wavy lines that flowed, but the portrait wasn't complete. When it was, Peeta wrote something across the corner of the paper tore it out of his sketchpad and handed it to Katniss. She was instantly mesmerized by what he had created. Her fears of so much of her skin being shown were quickly put to rest. Peeta's arms were around her, skeins of her hair wrapped through his fingers. Katniss had one arm around him and the other was bent between them, her hand pressed against Peeta's heart. Their backs, were bare, hips barely covered, below that the bedding Peeta had arranged looked like a fluid stream of silk caught in the midst of the dance their legs were taking part in. Their noses barely touched, her lips were lifted in a gentle smile, his slightly parted. They looked lost in each other's eyes, taking a magical journey into a world of enchantment and mystery. Katniss took a breath and read Peeta's message to her, "You feed my soul."*

*"What do you think?" There was a hint of shyness in Peeta's voice.*

*Katniss trailed her finger over the image and said, "I think..." she looked into his eyes, "this is what love looks like." That was the night they started their evening ritual of lying face to face and sharing whatever came to mind. It was the highlight of Katniss' day.*

The first sounds of the raindrops hitting the leaves in the far off distance caught Katniss' attention. She looked to the sky, waiting for the storm to rain down upon them, but it never did. The lightning had disappeared and the startling sound of the cannon's fire echoed

through the arena. She glanced over her shoulder to see Finnick stir and then lay back down into his restless slumber. There was a movement in the trees. Katniss jumped to her feet and took aim on whatever predator, be it human or manmade, that may try to harm them and then she saw it. There wasn't something moving *in* the trees, but the trees themselves were moving. The rubbery branches that she had climbed earlier in the day were now reaching out like arms. The sweet odor in the air hit her and like the bells that had tolled earlier, Katniss felt the warning ringing through her system. "Get up," she walked backwards towards the hut. In the distance the ground began to change, spirals of dirt and sand formed like tiny tornadoes. "GET UP! WAKE UP!" She reached for Peeta who shot into an upright position at the sound of her call. The top of their hut was lifted off and a rubbery branch reached in just missing Finnick. A gust of wind carrying tiny bits of sparkling sand brushed against Katniss' skin and even before they could leave their temporary safe haven she could see the effects the sand had left on her flesh.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter**

### **22: Humane**

### **Sacrifices, a hunger**

# games fanfic |

# FanFiction

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Twenty-One: Humane Sacrifices**

**Previously in CF:R the clock struck twelve. The teams from D4 and D12 joined forces in the arena and at the Capitol and an alliance was forming between the tributes from D3 and D7. I wonder how Johanna Mason is doing in the arena with her new group of friends?**

**Thanks to my beta S for pulling double duty and doing the beta job on his own. He gave me some great feedback for this chapter and I'm thankful. A, glad you're back home soon and hope you had a wonderful vacation! \*Everyone wave to my betas\* To all of you that are reading the CF:RO series, the new chapter got posted yesterday. Feel free to go to [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com) to see a preview of the next chapter. And THANKS for reading and reviewing, y'all. What say we check and see what's happening now...**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**...BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG!**

Caesar Flickerman appeared in the center of the television screen sitting next to Claudius Templesmith at an anchor style news desk. "Claudius, what we just heard was the ringing of the clock announcing to the world that it's midnight."

Haymitch glimpsed at the time being projected from the clock sitting on a decorative table, met Effie's worried gaze and stared at the images on the large television display surrounding Caesar and Claudius. Katniss and Finnick were sitting in front of a makeshift hut while Peeta and Mags slept. Johanna, Blight, Wiress and Beetee had taken shelter amongst some foliage. The Careers were on the hunt. Chaff had been watching them from a spot up high on a hill, keeping out of sight. The female morphling from District Six was hiding in the middle of a cluster of trees, drawing pictures on the ground with a stick and shaking from either fear, or withdrawal from the drugs her system craved. The male tribute from Ten was asleep while the female kept watch and the woman from District Five was veiled beneath some leaves and moss, camouflaging herself from her deadly competitors.

"Yes indeed, Caesar," Claudius responded, "and as you can see, many of the tributes are wondering what that sound signifies."

Caesar turned his head towards Claudius. "Obviously this is a sign from the Gamemakers, not only to the tributes, but to the viewing audience as well. What I'm wondering, Claudius is..." Caesar turned to the camera, "what do you think it means? Do the Gamemakers' have something in store for the tributes? Is this simply a ploy on their part to keep the tributes on their toes?"

"Caesar," Claudius said, "We've never seen anything like this in the arena before..."

"We've never seen former victors in the arena before either," Caesar said with a smile.

"This is why I'm certain the Gamemakers have something, shall I say...special planned." As if on cue, the first sign came hot on the tail of Claudius' comment.

The white lightning slicing through the black sky and hitting the tall tree had Haymitch dropping his head, staring at a spot between his feet, with concern for what was about to happen. He wasn't sure what the "plan" was that Claudius spoke of, but he agreed with the voice of the Hunger Games, the Gamemakers were up to something and it wasn't going to be good. One by one the images of the tributes surrounding Caesar and Claudius disappeared until the only one left was the female tribute from District Five.

"What do you think they'll do to her?" Portia asked.

"We don't know that anything is going to happen," Haymitch viewed the monitor with an uneasy sense of expectation. "Maybe someone's sneaking up on her."

The pile of greenery Five had hidden herself under began to move. Her hand snuck out from underneath its guise, smacking at something by her head then tucked back under cover. The light colored sand began to grow darker as tiny creatures began to converge on her. A close-up shot of the tiny red insects took over a portion of the screen.

Caesar began to describe what they were seeing, "As you can tell by the color and size of the heads on these insects, they're pyroants, a genetically engineered fire ant that has the ability to breathe fire and destroy anything in its path within a short span of time."

"The beauty of these ants are how they can...yes," Claudius commented as he watched the ants swarm towards their target, "see how they burned right through that branch lying in their way without leaving so much as a trace of it behind."

"Claudius, what amazes me about this tiny creature's ability is how they can breathe fire, yet the flame they produce is so hot that their targets...like the branch...have no time to go up in flames. They merely cease to be...disintegrate, if you will...like it never even existed." Caesar sat forward with an excited look in his eye. "They're coming up on her now. She's completely surrounded. Let's watch and see if this she can escape this swarm or if the pyroants will be the victors in this particular case."

Claudius grinned and said, "My money is on the ants."

Miniscule bursts of flames shot out of the ant's mouths, eating away at the pile of leaves and moss the tribute from District Five was hiding under. She attempted to get to her feet, her screams resonating through the arena, but the ants were on a mission of destruction and Five fell back to the ground. The clothing she had on appeared to be melting as the pyroants covered her entire body. The insects found their way into her mouth, silencing her wretched cries, up her nose and bored into her eyes.

Effie sat and watched...waited for the sound of the cannon to announce the death of the tribute, putting the woman out of her misery, yet there was nothing but silence. Effie's stomach was churning as she watched the former victor being eaten alive. Her naked flesh was completely covered in a mass of lethal insects as her body writhed on the ground. 'Thank, God,' Effie thought when she heard the cannon fire. Still Effie found herself filled with regret for the woman...wondered if she had a family. Was someone waiting at home for this former victor or was she like so many of the others that had won the Games; alone, lost in a world that had promised her a life of luxury? Effie stared at the woman on the television screen, ignoring the banter between Caesar and Claudius, and thought to herself, 'This woman fought and murdered children, when she was just a child



herself in the arena, and now she's nothing but a skeleton. When will the barbarism of the Capitol come to an end?'

The arena was quiet save for the exception of a the occasional crack of thunder and torrential rain, that for some reason, seemed to be confined to one area of the arena. The Careers discussed going back towards the Cornucopia then thought better of it, not wanting to be around the large body of water during an electrical storm. Then the television changed to Katniss taking aim with her bow at something in the jungle, and the tension within the suite provided for the team from District Twelve, could suddenly be cut with a knife.

"Get up," Katniss said as she began moving backwards towards her sleeping allies. "GET UP! WAKE UP!" Effie covered her mouth with her hand and held in a soft sob. She was grateful Annie had fallen asleep when she saw the branch of a tree barely missing Finnick as he woke from his slumber. "Run! Ruuuun!" Effie shivered at the sound of Katniss' scream.

"Sweet mother..." Haymitch's fingers formed a point as he pressed them against his mouth. He watched as the jungle surrounding Katniss, Peeta, Finnick and Mags slowly came to life and began its lethal assault.

Peeta, though awake, was listless, as he ran after Katniss. "He's still not doing well," Portia said quietly to the group.

"What's happening to their skin?" Effie asked when she saw tiny blisters forming all over Peeta and Katniss whenever they were struck with flecks of golden sand. "What's happening?" She practically yelled.

Haymitch threw her a cautious glare, warning her not to show too much concern. "Guessing there's something in the arena that's hurting them."

Caesar Flickerman took up a position on the television screen. "Well, this isn't a good sign for our star-crossed-lovers of District Twelve."

"Not at all," Claudius agreed. "Or for their allies from District Four. That sand seems to be causing some type of reaction when it comes in contact with their skin."

"Claudius, I'm not sure what I'm seeing here...is that a toxic tornado?"

"Yes, Caesar," Claudius nodded his head in excitement, "I believe it is."

"Those of you may not remember," Caesar addressed the camera, "I believe it was the Sixtieth Games in which the toxic tornado was introduced."

"That was the one and only time it was used," Claudius added his two cents.

"The chemicals in the twisters are filled with a form of nerve gas that can affect the tributes' muscles...reflexes..." Caesar tapped at his chin with his index finger. "One must wonder what type of damage that can have on Katniss Everdeen, given her current condition."

Portia's fingers rubbed at her temple. "Dear, God."

"Peeta!" Katniss screamed to him. "Watch my feet! Follow my footsteps!" She jumped over a large root then another and he followed, but the whirlwind of poison the Gamemakers placed inside of the arena was getting stronger and quickly catching up to them.

"You have to run, Katniss!" Peeta yelled. "Leave me and run!"

"NO!" She yanked at his arm.

Effie stood up and walked to the bar, poured herself a shot of whiskey, and downed it, textbook Haymitch Abernathy. She had to keep her emotions under control, but there was no way she could do that while watching the television screen. She turned her back to it and simply listened to the sounds that floated through the room.

"What the hell is that?" Haymitch's voice was laden with fear.

Skip, the mentor from District Four answered, "A sand storm."

The skin of Effie's arms began to tingle, the tiny hairs stood on end. "FINNICK!" She heard Katniss' voice call out.

"Get up, Peeta. Get up," Portia's voice sounded tremulous.

"I can't hold onto him!" Effie looked up at the ceiling and tried to put the horrible images she was imagining out of her mind when she heard Katniss begging for help.

Haymitch began to shudder like he hadn't had a drink in over a week. He stood up and walked to the bar, tearing his eyes away from the screen and saw the silent tears streaming down Effie's face. He couldn't imagine what she was going through, having to force herself not to watch what was happening in order to keep any form of composure, so he told her. "Peeta's skin is blistered pretty bad, Katniss' is a little better. Mags is taking the brunt of it on one side of her body...Finnick has her thrown over his shoulders, but he's having a hard time navigating through the terrain." Haymitch flinched. "Geez...what the hell?" Haymitch grabbed Effie before she could turn around. "Something almost grabbed Katniss, but she's okay."

"I have to take him!" They could hear Finnick's voice calling out. "Take Mags!"

A weak sound came out of the speakers. "Ruhn, Katniss...babeee."

Haymitch's heart was beating uncontrollably. "Come on, sweetheart. Get out of there."

Effie spun around and saw Mags grab Finnick's face and plant a kiss on his lips, walk backwards then lift her arms up in the air. It took all of a second, for the rubbery arms of a living tree, to grasp her outreached hands and throw her into a twister of poison. Her fragile eighty year old body was now thrown around the center of a ten foot high tornado, jerking, contorting, being shredded apart by a combination of the centrifuge and the noxious contaminants within. The sound of the cannon shot out into the night announcing Mags' horrific demise to the remaining tributes.

"Mags," Skip said quietly as he hung his head in mourning.

No one in the suite could decipher what was being said amongst their tributes as the image split and was now showing the tributes from District Three and District Seven on the other half of the screen. Johanna Mason and her allies were now the prominent ones on display for the viewing audience.

"Another one bites the dust," Johanna picked up a rock and threw it across the jungle floor.

"Do you have to be so rude, Johanna?"

"Bite me, Blight."

Coming from the side of the television with Katniss and Peeta, were the sounds of whistling winds, grunts from Finnick and Katniss' urging herself on, "Go!" A death grip over her abdomen as she ran ahead of the wall of fury heading straight for Peeta and Finnick.

Haymitch was torn between both scenes. Though Katniss had a decent lead ahead of the damaging storm he was still concerned about the poison that was entering her bloodstream. Her blisters were bad, but her skin wasn't drooping like Peeta and Finnick's were starting to do. 'Good going, sweetheart. Keep that kid safe out there,' he thought to himself as Katniss kept her eyes forward and moved as fast as she could. Still, Caesar's question about the gas had him more than concerned about the harm the cyclone's toxins might have on Katniss and Peeta's child. "Effie?"

"Yes," her jaw was tight, her hands shaking.

"I want a doctor." Haymitch turned to her.

"Are you sick?" She worried.

"For Katniss. Now!" He barked.

Effie took one more look at the screen and hurried towards the door of the suite.

"Wait!" Haymitch didn't want Effie roaming around by herself unless it was absolutely necessary. The last thing he needed was for her to be taken by Peacekeepers and back into the hands of Viggo Bettes.

"Take Skip with you," Haymitch made a motion with his head for the mentor to follow Effie. It was risky sending Effie off with a mentor from another district, but he rationalized this by telling himself that they were all on the same team while Finnick and Mags were allies with Katniss and Peeta and no one would question it.

"Let's go." Skip slapped his thighs and followed the escort out of the suite and down the hall. "Where are we going?"

"To the medical bay." Effie could've called and asked for a doctor, but there was one and only one that she thought she could entrust with Katniss' well being in the arena. While Effie was getting her body polish she noticed the doctor with the little bump on her stomach and brought up pregnancies. The physician was almost four and a half months pregnant and Effie was certain she'd take pity on Katniss in the arena. Within thirty minutes she and Skip returned to the suite with the doctor alongside. "Haymitch, Dr. Valero is here."

Haymitch whipped around. "Been watching the Games?"

"Isn't everyone?" the doctor, tall woman with long dark hair and eyes that matched, glanced at the screen, cringing slightly before turning her focus back to Haymitch. "How can I help you, Mr. Abernathy?"

"I need a doctor here with us. Katniss' condition is precarious in that arena. Chances are I'll be sending in some medications for her. I need to know what's safe...what's not...will she need special treatment for certain things? She's not like the average tribute. I'm sure the Gamemakers won't have a problem with it. Hell, I'll bring it directly to the Head Gamemaker myself if I have to." Haymitch knew they were being listened to and this was a perfect excuse to speak to Plutarch.

"I'll be happy to answer whatever questions you may have...give advice, however, I cannot be at your beck and call unless notified by the Head Gamemaker," the doctor said.

"Effie!" Haymitch bellowed.

"I'm right behind you." She pursed her lips, "And keep your voice down. You'll wake Annie."

Haymitch spun around and faced her. Taking her advice, he spoke in a softer tone filled with urgency. "Get me a meeting with Plutarch. Call

whoever you have to...do what you need to...just get me a meeting with the man."

Effie gave Haymitch a curt nod and headed to the Gamemakers' station leaving Skip behind, much to Haymitch's distress. She didn't care if she had to marry that bastard Viggo Bettes, she would get the man to allow Haymitch to meet with Plutarch Heavensbee if it was the last thing she did.

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Katniss screamed at the top of her lungs, hauling Peeta to his feet. "Run! Ruuuun!" She pulled him as hard as she could, but his body was moving slower than normal. "Come on, Peeta. Please," she begged him as he staggered behind her like he was still half asleep.

Finnick darted past the pair with Mags on his shoulders, his trident in hand. "I got ya, Mags." He felt her slap at his back and saw her pointing behind him. Finnick twisted around and saw the branches of the trees reach out and grab at Katniss, like a long arm covered in tropical leaves, barely missing her. "Move!" He called out to Katniss and continued running with Mags atop his frame.

The soil split beneath Peeta's feet, a bulky root burst up, hooking over the tip of his artificial foot causing him to fall face first onto the uneven terrain, almost pulling Katniss down with him. There was no chance of him moving as rapidly as she could on her own. "Go, Katniss. I'm oka..." he began to choke as he staggered to his feet, taking in a mouthful of dry sand flying through the air.

Katniss had his hand in hers, tugging him behind her, but the roots of the trees were sprouting up from every which way, dangerous

obstacles hidden in the darkness of night, hindering their escape. Rubbery branches were coming at them from both directions, Katniss ducked just in time to avoid being carried off into the growing cyclones heading their way. "Come on, Peeta!" She screamed. Her entire body was shaking when she saw the fearsome force of wind heading directly for them. Never in her life had she seen anything like the ten foot high twisters ripping through the jungle with such speed and power, she was certain the cyclones would tear the trees from the ground and toss them about like they were nothing more than kindling. The blisters on her skin were biting into her flesh, Peeta couldn't control his feet as he ran, obviously he was worse off than he had led her to believe after his run in with the force field, and time wasn't on their side. She held up her free hand to block her eyes, so the blowing sand wouldn't fly into them and proceeded to dart through the jungle as fast as Peeta's feet would allow them.

Peeta could feel the muscles in his leg tightening up; a sharp stabbing pain shot through his right hand, the fingers that had been damaged when he was whipped had lost all sensation. He could barely see in front of him, the roots were no longer coming up from beneath the earth, but were blending in with it and he couldn't make out what was flat and what wasn't. "Go, Katniss." He kept trying to tell her to leave him behind, he'd make it out on his own or die trying, but she was either ignoring him or didn't hear him.

She had lost him once today and wasn't about to lose him again, but he was going to kill them both if he fell once more. "Peeta! Watch my feet! Follow my footsteps!"

"You have to run, Katniss!" Peeta yelled. "Leave me and run!" Whistling sounds were piercing his eardrums like a howling wind.

"NO!" Her hand kept an unbreakable bond with his. "Keep moving!"



Peeta stared intently at her feet, trusting her to guide them on their way out of the deadly maze of uprooted trees, branches and a whirlwind of sharp sand. They were making better time, but the whistling sound was getting louder, the wind behind him was getting stronger and his legs were getting weaker. "I can't keep..." He fell face first again into a small pile of sand and tried to get up, but his arms gave out.

"NO! NO!" Katniss turned around and screamed as loud as she could. "FINNICK! FIIINNICK!"

Finnick had saved Mags from the rubbery branches twice as they attempted to tug her from his grasp. He felt her slap him on the back and heard Katniss' terrified screams behind him. He turned and ran to Peeta without hesitation. "I have to help him, Mags." His feet bounding over the hurdles provided by the Gamemakers in a desperate attempt to reach them.

"I can't hold onto him!" Katniss yelled out to Finnick. Her braid was now standing straight up in the air and felt like it was going to be ripped out of her head. This was where she and Peeta were going to die, she was sure of it.

"I have to take him," Finnick stood Mags next to Katniss, "Take Mags!" Then bent down and lifted Peeta to his feet.

One whole side of Peeta's face was drooping, his lips were blistered and swollen, his throat was burning and he knew Katniss had to get out of there. Something was having a noxious affect on him and he didn't want to imagine what it could be doing to Katniss. "Ruhn, Katniss...babeee."

Katniss lifted Mags' arm, but the woman shook her head and tapped at Katniss belly then pointed towards the Cornucopia. Mags grabbed

Finnick's face, planted a kiss smack on his lips then stepped back and lifted her arms up to the trees. Katniss didn't watch what happened to Mags, she ran. Her hands were clenched over her lower abdomen, a feeble attempt to protect the baby, her entire body covered in blisters, but the desire to save her life...the life she and Peeta had created took over. Peeta and Finnick were behind her, but she tried not to think about it, Finnick would get them out of there, he had to. She could hear their grunts as she distanced herself from them. "Go," she willed herself. "Move, Katniss! Move!" She was literally screaming at herself while jumping and dodging the killer trees. She almost fell, but was able to regain her balance. She didn't dare look behind her to see what kind of progress the Gamemakers' first stunt was making, all she knew was she had to reach someplace safe. Her throat was dry, her legs were ready to give out, the wind had died down and beneath her was dark, wet sand. The ocean was only a few yards away, she fell to her knees, staring at the deadly area of the jungle that Finnick and Peeta were still tangled in. The forces of wind appeared to be trapped along with the living trees and the sandstorm. They were bumping up against some type of force field perhaps, blocked from the rest of the arena. "Peeta," her lips felt swollen when she spoke his name. Relief flooded through her when she saw that he and Finnick had finally made their escape and was staggering towards her.

Peeta could barely make out Katniss lying on the sand a few feet ahead of him as his whole body slumped to the ground. Finnick fell face first onto the beach and let out an awful noise, his whole body covered in blisters, the skin on his face, arms and legs sagging. Peeta rolled onto his back and noticed something in the trees; he hoped that the branches wouldn't start grabbing at them again. "Wah...tah," he pointed to the sea.

Katniss rolled her head in Peeta's direction. "What?"

"Wah...tah." He wanted to make sure she was out of the branches deadly reach just in case and the ocean was far enough away from them. "Go." He pointed again.

She forced herself onto her hands and knees, dragging her aching muscles towards the edge of the beach. She removed her bodysuit, which was tattered and torn, stripping down to her undergarments before diving into the sea. The first sting of the salty water felt like claws ripping through her flesh then a feeling of relief began to spread through her body. She forged deeper in, ignoring the initial stings and reveled in the soothing sensation the deep provided. The blisters began to disappear, her muscles came back to life and when she sunk beneath the surface she felt her lips returning to normal. She gargled with the salt water and spit it out over and over again until the burning in her throat went away and swam to shore. She rescued her pin from the useless bodysuit and placed it on her undershirt. "Peeta," she knelt down next to him. "We need to get you into the ocean." She had no clue what was in the water, but there was something inside of it that drew the poison out of her system.

"Mohin...ays," he pointed up to the trees. The sight of the musical birds Katniss wore as her token brought a small sense of comfort to Peeta.

Katniss couldn't understand what he was saying. She looked up at where he focused and saw the black birds and the flash of white underneath their wings flitting about in the trees. "Mockingjays." She tried to lift Peeta to his feet. "You can do this, Peeta. Stand up. Lean on me."

He fought to get to his feet and felt her arms grab him around the waist so he wouldn't tumble back to the ground. It took them a little while, but she finally got him to the ocean's edge. She stripped him of

the flimsy garment the Capitol had provided for them, leaving him in nothing but a pair of boxers and his undershirt then buckled the purple belt around his waist. He kept telling himself to move. His mind was willing, but his body simply wouldn't respond.

"I'm going to roll you." Katniss sat behind him and used her legs for leverage, pushing his body into the water until he was partially submerged. She immediately hopped in to make sure he stayed afloat. "It'll hurt at first, but it gets better. There must be healing properties in here."

Peeta's head was screaming in pain then sighing in relief. Though his artificial leg didn't have any visible wounds, it was as much a part of him as any of his other limbs and he felt each and every thing that was happening to it as though it were real. His fingers were still numb regardless of the water drawing out whatever venom was in his system and his tongue was so swollen it felt like it was about to close his airway off.

"You're going to have to stick your head underwater." Katniss held him from behind.

He was hesitant at first then slowly dipped his chin and lips into the water. He choked, spit and realized that the water was actually helping his tongue. Never in his entire life had he completely submerged himself into such a large body of water. Katniss, Finnick even Mags had no fear of it, but Peeta actually found himself a little timid. It was silly after all he had faced in his life, but that didn't seem to matter. The Gamemakers may not have been done with them yet and it wouldn't surprise him if he got dragged down into the deepest part of the sea.

"Trust me," Katniss whispered against his swollen ear. "I won't let you go."

Peeta sucked in a breath and let his body sink. The water was warm and comforting. He could feel Katniss' arms sliding around his trunk and from the feel of her splashing legs she was now in front of him. She lifted him upwards and Peeta shot up into the night air. "Ah," he breathed out. He too took mouthful after mouthful of water, gargling, spitting it out, and ridding himself of the sand's effect. He felt surprisingly better with the exception of his fingers. "My hand is bad." It was a welcome relief to hear his own voice again, though it was rough and scratchy.

"What's wrong with it?" Katniss reached for it and looked it over.

"My fingers are numb," he tried to wiggle them.

"Go under again...your eyes are still a little droopy. Keep them open this time."

They sucked in huge gulps of air sinking underwater. Peeta could feel his eyes stinging, things looked murky at first, then the water became clearer and he could make out Katniss' staring at him through the blue. Once again he felt her encouraging him upwards. He blinked the water out of his eyes and looked around. "We need to get Finnick in here."

"Yeah. Come on." She pulled him towards the shore. "Is your hand better?"

"Not really, but I'll keep it submerged while we take care of Finnick." He tried to keep the concern out of his voice, but there was no hiding it from Katniss which was obvious from the look she shot him. Seriously, it's no big deal. I've gotten used to using my other fingers anyway."

They walked across the beach studying Finnick's worn body. "Did I look this bad?" Katniss asked.

"From what I could make out, you were blistered, but your skin didn't look like it was sagging this way." Peeta lifted Finnick on one side, Katniss on the other.

"What caused it do you think...the drooping?"

Peeta remembered the first signs of the nerve agent the Capitol had used against them. "It was mixed in with those twisters." He noticed Katniss' questioning look. "When I was watching the tapes of the former victors they used them and killed off three tributes. They're called toxic tornadoes. There's a chemical inside of it that affects your nervous system."

"It smelled horrible."

"I didn't smell a thing," Peeta gave her an odd look.

"It was sweet...sickeningly sweet, "Katniss made a face thinking about the odor of the poison. "What about the blisters?"

"I'm guessing that came from the sand," Peeta answered.

"That's what I thought too," she agreed as they bent down to lift up Finnick. She was exhausted more so than normal and it wasn't just because she was in the Games. She had dodged a firestorm last year and was badly burned days after entering the arena and even then she felt more alert than she did now. Katniss had to wonder if the chemicals were having an adverse affect on her. The weight of Finnick's body was causing a strain on the muscles in her shoulders and a tugging in her lower back; she was completely sapped of energy. "Peeta, we need to put him down. I can't keep carrying him. He's too heavy."

"I've got him," Peeta stopped walking, "let go." Together they bathed Finnick slowly; he had gotten the worst of the damage amongst the three of them. "He needs to go under too."

"Yeah," Katniss started shaking Finnick by the shoulders, rousing him from his exhausted state. "His eyes are bad. I can't even see them anymore."

"Finnick," Peeta spoke softly to him. The water around them bubbled with the milky substance that had been in Finnick's body. "You need to get your head underwater before this stuff causes permanent damage."

Finnick let himself sink down into the ocean. He could hear the muffled sounds of Katniss and Peeta speaking above him, feel the life coming back into his limbs and forced his eyes open so he could see again. He took in a mouthful of water and spit it into the air when he broke through the top. "Ahm guuud." He wasn't quite good yet, but he was better. Well enough to allow the ocean to heal not only his wounds, but his heart as well. Losing Mags was something he knew would happen eventually, but the pain of it was worse than he expected.

Katniss looked to the trees and saw the mockingjays gathering, flying around and took it as a sign of safety. If the Gamemakers had another storm planned the birds would be spooked and shrieking. She stood knee high in the water with Peeta by her side, soaking his hand in the ocean. "It did something to your nerves, huh?"

He looked up at her. "Yeah." He paused before saying, "How much of that stuff got to you, Katniss?"

"Not a lot. Most of my injuries were blisters and I think the water sucked that out of my system." She bent down and let the waves splash over her. "You think..." she wasn't going to voice her worries.

Peeta had no idea what to think, if there would be any harmful effects on the baby or not, but she was right about one thing... "This water took it out of our system, so I wouldn't worry too much about it." He watched as Katniss walked further into the sea until it splashed around her waist and followed her. "Hey," he hugged her, "banana nut is fine."

Katniss gripped his back. "I know. It was just scary." She didn't know if the baby was fine or not.

"We'll keep an eye on you," Peeta rubbed her spine. "If something happened to the baby, we'll know."

"Yeah, I know." That was the one thing Katniss did know about pregnancies. The awful side of them. Those were usually the women that would show up at her mother's doorstep in desperate need of help when the doctors could do no more. "I hope I puke tomorrow."

Peeta grinned a little and said, "I hope you puke for the next nine months."

"Me too," Katniss rested her head against his shoulder. 'It was strange,' she thought. At first she hadn't wanted this child...she hadn't wanted any child, but it was here, and now the thought of losing it scared her as much as losing Peeta.

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The pounding on the front door woke Prim from a dead sleep. She followed her mother down the stairs. "Who do you think that could be? It's the middle of the night."

"I don't know, but I want you to stay back, Primrose." Her mother gave her a gentle warning before opening the door. "Bing! You scared us."

Peeta's father didn't wait to be invited into their house; he pushed past them and went straight for the television. "The Gamemakers have started things up in the arena."

"Katniss and Peeta?" Prim asked, fear suddenly coursing through her veins.

"All the tributes," he answered.

The scene playing out before them was one of horror. Katniss was running towards the ocean with Finnick and Peeta behind her. On the other side was a close-up of a rainstorm of blood moving towards four unknowing tributes. A mixture of sounds echoed through the arena. Wind whipping, heavy rain, grunts from Peeta and Finnick, trees crashing and a conversation between the tributes from District Three and Seven.

"Bite me, Blight." Johanna squinted and said, "Finally! Rain. I'm dying of thirst out here."

"We could use the water," Blight agreed.

"They don't know it's blood," Evelyn closed her eyes and shook her head in disgust. Katniss was almost to the beach, but Peeta and Finnick were being lifted off of the ground by a burst of wind.

"That thing is sucking them up, mom," Prim's voice was shaking.

"No, it's the wind coming off of it." Bing eased her fear. Golden flecks of sand were slapping them around every which way mixed with particles of dirt as well as the leaves that had blown off of the trees. "They're almost to the end of it."

"Mom what's wrong with their skin?"

"I don't know, sweetie." Evelyn guessed, but she wasn't going to say. "A reaction to whatever was in the arena."

"Katniss?" Prim's teary eyes met her mother's. "Will she..."

"She didn't seem to get hit with as much of it as Peeta and Finnick." Evelyn was truly relieved when she saw a close-up of Katniss lying on the beach. She had blisters and her lip was drooping, but she got out before the sand storm attacked Peeta and Finnick. She didn't know what types of medications Haymitch would be able to send in, but she hoped it was enough to save their lives.

"...tock...tick tock."

"Shut up, Nuts. You're driving me insane with your friggin' tick tock," Johanna looked like she was about to kill Wiress. Their images took up the entire screen once Peeta, Katniss and Finnick made it to the beach.

"Where are Katniss and Peeta?" Prim squeezed her mom's hand.

"If the camera is off of them, then they're safe, Prim. This is a good sign." Peeta's dad said it with high hopes.

Caesar Flickerman came on screen and began speaking to Claudius Templesmith. "Claudius, I think I'm noticing a pattern here." Claudius nodded his head in agreement. "We heard the ringing of the bell at

midnight and by one the tribute from District Five had been eliminated from the Games by a..." Caesar shivered with delight, "...terribly gruesome swarm of pyroants. At two we saw a storm beginning to brew in a portion of the arena which was then followed up with toxic tornadoes and a sand storm heading straight for the teams from District Four and Twelve...and can I just say," he smiled at Claudius then at the camera, "bravo to the Gamemakers for their ingenuity with the living trees. My heart almost stopped several times when I saw those branches reaching for our lovebirds during their escape."

Claudius began, "Now we're going on three o'clock and you'll see the tributes from District Three and Seven have a surprise headed their way." He turned to Caesar, "The question is will the tributes figure this out on their own?"

"Oh, I believe one of them already has." Caesar gave the camera a charming smile and said, "Makes me wonder what the Gamemakers have in store come four o'clock."

The raindrops began to splash down around the teams from District Three and Seven. "Thank Go...ugh." Johanna spit. "It's blood." She grabbed Wiress' arm. "We've got to get out of he..." she spit again.

Prim covered her head with her hands at the image on the screen. The rain began pouring down thick heavy dark red drops of blood upon the tributes. They began to scramble, obviously it had impaired their vision, downhill towards the ocean. "Are the Gamemakers trying to force everyone to the Cornucopia?"

"Don't know," Bing answered. "Before Katniss and Peeta were on, the woman from District Five was killed by the mutts. She never even had a chance."

"What about the Careers?" Evelyn asked.

"Hunting. What else?" Peeta's dad gave his opinion. "It's like Caesar said...every hour they're going from tribute to tribute showing what kind of torture they've planned for them."

Johanna had Wiress by the arm and was dragging her downhill towards the water, Beetee was stumbling behind, wiping the lenses of his glasses off with his fingers which seemed pointless and Blight followed with his hands out trying to feel his way through the blinding rain. He smacked into the force field, much like Peeta had earlier in the day, and flew through the air, his foot whacking Beetee in the head, knocking him to the ground, causing the already injured tribute to let out a howl of pain. Johanna turned to see what was happening and yanked Wiress behind her. She knelt down and started to feel for Blight's pulse. Wiress was crying and Beetee was trying to stand up when the cannon rang out announcing Blight's death. They showed the trio traveling through the jungle until finally giving into the Gamemakers' stunt and sitting out the rest of the storm for the remaining hour.

The screen split showing Katniss, Peeta and Finnick in their portion of the arena. Caesar Flickerman's image popped up in the corner of the television screen. "Oh, no," a wicked glint in his eye, "looks like our unlikely alliance has inadvertently stumbled right into the next danger zone while seeking shelter from the storms." Peeta was getting some water, Finnick heading out of the ocean and Katniss' face contorted into one of horror when she heard Rue's song being sung by the mockingjays. Caesar continued, "And I think I've figured out what the four o'clock hour will bring. How about you folks?"

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Exhaustion was too mild a word to use for what Johanna was feeling. Volts had been a drag on their group all day long from the amount of blood he had lost and the wound on his back continued to seep. Nuts hadn't said much all day, but she continually stopped and looked out towards the Cornucopia writing in the air with her finger like she was trying to figure out some kind of mathematical problem and Blight was... 'Well, he's Blight,' Johanna thought. He didn't know anything about the terrain. Didn't know what animals were edible. About the only thing he was good for was keeping Volts on his feet. They took shelter under a cluster of trees on top of a hill. It had given them a good view of the Cornucopia when they peered out from the branches and felt that they'd have a good chance of escaping if the Careers came up for them. There was no doubt in Johanna's mind that the Careers did what they did every year and stayed close to the golden horn, taking shelter in familiarity.

"What the hell is that?" Johanna heard the first bong being followed up by several more.

Wiress held out her fingers, counting on them one by one at the end of the ringing her whole face changed. She jumped up and looked down at the Cornucopia, turned to Johanna and said, "Tick tock," in a very quiet, shaky voice.

"Tick tock to you too," Johanna rolled her eyes. "Sit down Nuts before the Careers see you."

Blight stood by them, "What's up?"

"Nuts is losing it."

Wiress shook Blight by the arm and pointed to the center of the arena. "Tick tock."

"Yeah," Blight agreed with Johanna, "I think she might be going a little..." The huge crash of lightning that split the sky and struck a towering tree had them all staring. "Ever see a tree get hit with a bolt of lightning and not burn before?" He asked Johanna.

"These things are kind of rubbery. Maybe they can withstand it." Her answer might have been somewhat confident, but her head was saying there was something up with either the lightning or the tree. "Come on. We should get some rest."

"Want me to take first watch?" Blight offered.

"Hope you didn't think I was going to do it," Johanna rested with her back against the bark of a rubbery tree. "Nuts, go to sleep. See how good Volts is being?" She looked at Beetee who was passed out on his stomach. "Be a good nut job and go to sleep." She rubbed her temples wishing she could leave the woman behind...leave them all behind and find Finnick. Closing her eyes, she only hoped that Nuts would shut up long enough for her to doze off. Thankfully she did. Johanna ignored the first cannon fire, but was roused from her restive sleep by the sound of the night's second cannon, announcing the death of a tribute. "Another one bites the dust," Johanna picked up a rock and threw it across the jungle floor in frustration hoping it was a Career and not someone she actually liked.

"Do you have to be so rude, Johanna?" Blight threw her a dirty look.

It was the only way she knew how to deal with the deaths of the people she had known for years. "Bite me, Blight." The sight of thunder and lightning in the sky followed up by raindrops in the distance brought Johanna a little semblance of relief. "Finally! Rain. I'm dying of thirst out here."

"We could use the water," Blight agreed.

"Too bad we don't have anything to hold it in but our hands." Johanna started to draw circles in the dirt. "Guess I'll stay up till the rain comes in. No sense in going back to sleep now."

"Tick tock," Wiress was rocking back and forth with her knees to her chest. "Tick tock."

"Yippee. She's up." Johanna had enough of the woman's insane rambling. "Shut up, Nuts. You're driving me insane with your friggin' tick tock."

"Hickory dickory dock, the mouse went up the clock..." Wiress started to recite a nursery rhyme and Johanna was on the verge of strangling the woman.

Blight heard Beetee moan and tapped him on the shoulder. "Can't you get her to stop?"

"She's...ugh..." Beetee let his head fall down to the ground.

"Useless. They're friggin' useless." Johanna got up yearning for the rain to hurry up and get there. "When the hell is that storm going to reach us? I'm thirsty and Volts here needs something to drink before he passes out again."

"Maybe we should head for it?" Blight suggested.

"Sure," Johanna turned to him. "You drag the sliced up victor and I'll take the loon." She was tired of dragging the duo around and they all needed to get some rest before dehydration set in. "I'm not going anywhere. It'll come to us."

"TICK TOCK!" Wiress lunged to her feet and began pacing back and forth.

"SHUT UP!" Johanna got in her path and shook her.

"You both need to keep it down or we'll all be dead in no time," Blight warned them.

Johanna saw the rain hitting the leaves only a few yards away and felt the first warm trickle of water against her head. She lifted her face to the sky to capture some in her mouth, anything to quench her desperate thirst. "Thank Go...ugh." The salty taste turned her stomach. "It's blood." She grabbed Wiress' arm. "We've got to get out of he..." she spit the thick, red blood out. Whenever she opened her mouth to speak the rain filled it.

"I'll get..." Blight choked and spat. He grabbed Beetee's arm and followed Johanna diagonally downhill.

Between the sounds of Wiress' bellowing behind her and the literal bloodbath they were being given by the Gamemakers, Johanna felt like she was losing her mind too. The drizzle of rain was now coming down in buckets, drenching them to their skin. She could barely see where she was going and felt Wiress tripping behind her, but she didn't dare let the loony toon go or Nuts would wander away and get lost in the jungle. More work was not what Johanna was looking for. The loud thud followed up by Volts' groan had Johanna turning to see where Blight was. She saw her tribute partner lying perfectly still in the dirt. 'Shit,' she thought. 'SHIT!' She didn't dare open her mouth and scream, though she wanted to. She checked for his pulse and found none. 'He's dead.' The cannon's boom confirmed her thought. 'Damn it, Blight.' They weren't friends, but she didn't like the thought of losing the only thing that reminded her of home. Johanna was now alone with the crazy duo from District Three. She had to save them or they'd all die out there. She grabbed Beetee, who was trying desperately to stand on his own, by the arm, and held onto him for dear life. Now



both of her hands were occupied and if someone tried to attack them, she'd have a huge disadvantage. She could drop her allies to the ground and fight if she needed to, but a split second could mean the difference between life and death in the arena. Wiress began pulling her in a different direction. Johanna yanked the woman's arm, but Wiress wouldn't budge. Johanna's head began shaking in violent tremors, wanting desperately to hurl something across the arena, she kicked her foot into the dirt causing a rock to fly out and smack right into the force field, bouncing back and barely missing her leg. Had she continued going in the direction she wanted, she would've killed all three of them. 'Fine,' Johanna thought, 'You lead the group, Nuts.' They traveled until Beetee couldn't travel anymore. 'Now what?' Johanna thought to herself. 'We either keep on going and wind up like Blight or we try to hide under some trees.' They huddled on the ground; their faces buried between their legs for until downpour suddenly came to a stop. Temptation to run down to the ocean and rid herself of the congealed blood flashed through her mind, but she couldn't leave Nuts and Volts unattended for too long and they all needed to get some rest. She used the sand as a scrub, trying to rub some of the blood off of her face, but it was already dried and caked on from the dense heat within the arena.

"Tick tock," Wiress started her rambling again. "The mouse ran up the clock."

Johanna looked at Nuts and Volts wondering how they ever managed to win their Games and said, "Next time I head for a force field...don't stop me. It'll be preferable to listening to you."

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"I'm going to get some water," Peeta headed out of the sea and walked onto the dark, moist sand with Katniss behind him. "Finnick looks like he's okay on his own." The man was diving in and out of the water like a fish. "The awl?" Peeta asked Katniss.

She shook her head slowly from side to side. "No." It was gone. Either left at their old campsite or gone with Mags in the deadly jungle. "Why did she do that, Peeta? Maybe I could've gotten her out."

"Then you'd both look like me and Finnick," he put his arm around Katniss' neck and drew her to him. It didn't surprise Peeta that someone would do such a thing in the arena, not after learning about the people he had come into the Games with this year and they were good hearted individuals. "She gave her life so our baby would have a chance at one, Katniss."

"I guess, but..." Katniss rested her head on his shoulder, "...why?"

"Because some things are worth fighting for and some..." he rubbed her stomach, "are worth dying for." Peeta held Katniss' hands in his and said quietly, "Thank you, Mags." Katniss bit her lip and began gnawing at it. "Why don't you go back in the water...make sure all of that stuff is out of your system. Stay with Finnick...you're the healer. I'll let you know when I need the spile." He kissed her head.

"The healer? I wish I were." She let her fingers linger in his before heading back to the sea.

Peeta picked up his knife and found a tree to tap at the outskirts of the jungle. There was a sense of safety in the flock of mockingjays that were watching over them from the trees. In a way he felt like he was home again. He and Katniss had spent hours together in the woods whistling away and listening to the birds repeat their notes in unison.

Peeta bent his head down and started digging a tiny hole into the bark of the tree.

The ocean felt warm and relaxing as Katniss floated on her back staring up at the moon. Whatever healing properties it had on her and Peeta it seemed to transform Finnick. He went from swimming lazily to diving beneath the surface for long periods of time. Twisting, turning like some form of creature from the sea. He dived beneath the water and was down there for so long that Katniss was certain he had drowned only for him to pop up right next to her.

"Hey there," Finnick's flirtatious grin was in play.

Katniss was completely startled by his appearance. "Don't do that!"

"What, go under or scare you?" He waggled his brows.

"Both," she scowled at him. "Just behave yourself or if you're feeling that good why don't we go and help Peeta?"

"Sure." Finnick agreed before diving under and popping up on the other side of her. "What's he doing?"

"Getting water." Katniss shook her head at Finnick's playfulness. He dunked beneath the surface again and popped up so high it was like the water had propelled him into the air. "Great, I'm allies with a fish." She gave him a slight grin as she headed towards the shore. She undid the braid from her hair, running her fingers through the tangled mess and noticed that whatever was used against them in the Gamemakers' attack had thinned it out some. Her hands expertly fixed her long dark hair into the weave she wore down her shoulder. The sound of Finnick splashing around behind her and a slight tapping noise from Peeta forming a hole in a tree was all she could hear. The air was too still...too calm. 'Something's wrong,' she thought to herself.

The mockingjays began to sing out Rue's four note song into the night. 'Peeta would know better than to sing to the mockingjays,' she realized, 'it would give away our position.' But something had caused them to sing the song over and over again and it wasn't anyone from their trio.

Finnick walked up behind Katniss and said, "Peeta wouldn't sing to those birds would he?"

"He knows better," Katniss and Finnick shared concerned expressions. "Finnick," Katniss whispered to him as they reached the end of the jungle, weapons at the ready, "listen to them." The four notes the birds were singing sounded sharp and out of tune. It was like listening to a horror song made for the Games to accentuate the viewing experience for the audience. Katniss reached out and touched Finnick's shoulder gently. "Look." Their gazes went to the cluster of trees that a small flock of birds had nested in earlier only now the branches looked weighed down from the sheer amount of mockingjays that had joined them. Some of the birds, not all, appeared to be out of the ordinary. They looked like mockingjays, but there was something off about them. Their size? Their beaks? Katniss couldn't quite figure it out, the dark of the night hindering her examination of the birds. "Peeta," Katniss' tone was calm, barely above a whisper. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing on edge. "I need your help with something."

Peeta hadn't noticed a thing other than the sound of the singing birds which didn't faze him a bit. Mockingjays sang after all and he was too preoccupied with tapping the tree to notice the song. "Okay. I think I've just about got it. Where's the spile?"

"I've got it, but I need you to take a look at something first." Getting him away from the scores of birds had become imperative. "Only,

move quietly so you won't startle it." She held his hand, intent on leading him a safe distance away from the swarm of winged animals.

"Okay," he started to move slowly with her, sensing that something was wrong. He moved his lips, "Katniss, is everything all right?" But it was pitch black under the shelter of the trees and she couldn't make out what he was saying. He followed her and Finnick both towards the beach; they were all of five yards away from the ocean when he noticed how off the notes of the song the birds were singing sounded... 'Rue's song,' he realized. His eyes flashed for a split second upwards and the musical notes were gone replaced by a cacophony of shrieks and ear splitting whistles. With one tiny look Peeta had inadvertently set off the massive flock causing them to swarm around them, traveling more rapidly than any mockingjay he had seen in his life. Dozens of them were larger than that of the normal bird and their beaks were like sharp pointed daggers attacking them from every direction. The option of running for safety was long gone, tiny birds flew around them, forcing them to stay in place while the larger birds attacked some with their beaks aimed as weapons and others with their claws bared. Peeta may not have known much about animals, but the one thing he did know was that there was no mockingjay on earth that acted like this. "Mutts!" He screamed out as he battled with the small flying creatures, his knife clutched in his hand, slashing and stabbing at the vast flock of birds.

There were too many of them for Katniss' supply of arrows, she had to make each one count, taking aim on the larger, more lethal birds that came at them. Finnick, Peeta and herself formed a triangle, their backs to each other, each taking a side to defend themselves against the Capitol mutts. The sounds of Peeta hacking at the birds, Finnick's trident taking out several in one shot and Katniss shooting at the fierce creatures, mixed with the haunting calls of the birds, resonated in the air. There was a feeling of razor sharp claws dragging across her back

and the eerie sound of the bird's cry screeching through her ears, "Aaaaaaah," unaware it was her voice screaming out in pain.

Peeta ran to her, ripped the bird that had shredded her skin off of her and twisted its neck, tossing it to the ground like trash. He ripped the sheath of arrows from his back, noticing that Katniss was almost out and hurriedly handed it to her, "Katniss! Your arrows!" Quickly taking up his fighting position in their triangle again. Finnick's trident swooped past Peeta, skewering three mutts in one swift move, his weapon buried deep in the sand. Katniss was struggling to pull the sheath of arrows onto her bleeding shoulders when Peeta saw the deadly bird heading straight for her. Its sharp beak sure to pierce her heart, its claws sticking out in front, ready to rip her tiny torso to shreds. He threw his knife at it, but the loss of sensation in his fingers caused his aim to be off so he did the only thing he could think of. "GET DOWN, KATNISS!" He screamed, running as fast as he could towards her, in the hopes that the deadly animal would take him instead, knowing that he'd never get in front of her in time. A piercing squeal sang out into the night. Emaciated arms flailed about, crazed eyes, flesh bloodied and beaten, the female morphling from District Six seemed to materialize out of thin air and threw herself in front of Katniss, taking the flying beast's switchblade of a bill and razor like talons through her frail body.

# **Catching Fire:**

## **Rekindling Chapter**

### **23: Tick Tock!, a**

# **hunger games fanfic |**

# **FanFiction**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

**By: Jamie Sommers**

**Chapter Twenty-two: Tick Tock!**

**Previously, Gale was in shock that Peeta had been brought back to life. The attacks began in the arena. Mags and the Morphling gave up their lives for Katniss. Haymitch wanted a physician for Katniss in the arena and K/P feared for the baby's safety.**

**Dear Readers: Y'all blow my mind with some of the things you say. For those of you staying up till the wee hours of the morning to read my stories, get some sleep! They'll be there tomorrow. ;-)  
To those of you that faithfully read this and review it, I am truly touched by your kindness. For the new readers, welcome to my imagination.**

**Dear S and A: THANK YOU! This was an extremely long chapter and you both give of your time so freely without question and actually look forward to helping me. Thank you.**

**Now let's check out what's happening in...**

**Catching Fire: Rekindling**

"She'll figure it out," Gale said quietly to his mother as they watched the Games playing on their fuzzy television, the volume turned down so as not to wake up the rest of the household. "Catnip's smart that way. It won't take her long to figure out those attacks are timed."

"Let's hope so." Hazelle studied her son's tired expression, his shoulders slumping over. "Gale, it's almost five in the morning and you haven't slept at all. Why don't you try and grab a couple of hours rest before heading off to the mines?"

"What's the point?" Gale stood up. "I have to be there at six now."

"Six?" Hazelle let out a frustrated sigh.

"Yeah. Our shifts were extended again. My new schedule is from six to nine, but hey..." he stood up and feigned excitement before heading into the kitchen to grab some breakfast, "...I'm off on Sundays...for now."

Hazelle followed him and began putting together some lunch for him to take along; adding a couple of extra pieces of bread the baker had given to them. "Won't be long before they go back to regular work days."

"Whatever," Gale's voice was dripping with disgust. "Who cares, mom? What difference does one or two hours make? Nothing is ever going to change around here. Look at Katniss... she had everything. She won the Games and like the Capitol promised, she was paid handsomely for killing all those tributes. They tell us, once you're a victor you're out of the reaping for life, but where is she now?" Gale pointed towards the television set. "In the arena, that's where. Sure, they can tell us whatever they want, but they never do any of the things they promise."



"Gale, you need to keep your voice down." Hazelle worried.

"Why?" Gale turned on her. "Think the Peacekeepers might whip me for expressing my feelings towards the Capitol? Oh, wait...they did that already." He slammed his palms against the counter. "I'm sick of this life. Sick of what the Capitol is doing to us...to Catnip." His jaw tensed. "She's pregnant, mom," his voice became a stark contrast to what it had been only a second prior, it was now full of concern and quiet alarm, "and they sent her into that arena anyway. Hell, they're probably thrilled with the thought of getting rid of her kid. Wouldn't want another tribute like her in the arena to show them up."

"Is this about the Capitol or Katniss, Gale?" Hazelle ran a comforting touch over his shoulder.

"Both, I guess," he admitted.

"And what about Peeta? Where does he fit into all of this?" Hazelle stood back waiting for his answer.

"I wish I could answer that, mom." Gale rested his hip against the counter. "Yesterday I wished for his death... I literally wanted him dead with every fiber of my being."

"Why?" This took Hazelle by surprise. "I thought you had come to terms with him."

"So did I until I found out he married Katniss and got her pregnant." He stared at a worn spot on their kitchen floor. "I still can't believe he did that to her, mom. Peeta's a smart guy, so why would he do something so stupid?"

Hazelle let out a huff of air. "Do you think Katniss wasn't involved? Are you under some impression that he forced her into marriage and having a child with him?"

"He pressured her. I know he did," Gale insisted. "You didn't see the way he was acting with her in the woods, but I did. He was practically..." he lowered his voice down to barely above a whisper, "...seducing her out there and she was falling for it."

"How long have you known Katniss?" Hazelle said with a straight face.

"Since she was eleven."

"And in that time have you ever known her to be forced into something she wasn't prepared to face? Let herself be seduced into it?" She waved a hand at him and continued preparing his meal for him.

"Yeah," Gale had the perfect argument. "The Games last year...this year."

"She volunteered last year and I think we both know why she's in that arena again."

"What do you mean by that, mom?" Gale could sense his mother's lecture coming on by the look on her face.

"I was around the last time this country tried to fight against the Capitol." It happened when she had just gotten married to Gale's father, but their district had made an attempt at rebelling only to be stopped days afterwards. Hazelle turned to him. "I remember this district when people were whipped for just looking at a Peacekeeper. All this country needed was someone to show them that the Capitol isn't as powerful as they want us to believe." Hazelle pointed a finger at him. "And it wasn't just Katniss in that arena, young man. Peeta

was in there too. He had just as much to do with standing up to the Gamemakers as she did. There are..."

"That's my point!" Gale threw up his hands in frustration. "He's going to get her killed."

"Why don't you let someone finish their thoughts before butting in?" Hazelle lowered her voice. "There are people that think they threatened to eat those berries to put the Capitol in their place, but don't you believe it. Those two were willing to die together because it was preferable to living without each other." She knew she was hurting her son, but he had to face the truth one and for all. "That girl loves him something fierce and not because he tried to...seduce her in the woods, but because he's a good person. No one, not one person on this earth, has the right to tell her who to love. Now I'm sorry if this hurts you, Gale." Hazelle rubbed his arm. "Truly, I am, but the heart wants what the heart wants and her heart wants Peeta."

It wasn't easy to stand there and listen to his mother taking Peeta's side. In fact, it stung like hell. "You think he's a better person than me? You think that's why she chose him?"

"I think you're a very good person, Gale, but your anger gets the best of you. It runs your emotions. A lot like Katniss' does." Hazelle wrapped up his lunch and put it in a tin pail for safe keeping. "In my opinion, Katniss didn't choose someone to love...love chose her and if you think she agreed to a life with Peeta because he pressured her into it... Well, I think we both know what Katniss would do to him if he tried to force something like marriage on her."

"He'd have an arrow through his eye," Gale said it with a knowing grin.

"Darn right. The problem here is love."

Gale blushed. "I didn't want to fall in love with her. It just sort of happened."

"Oh, it's not just Katniss I'm talking about. It's Peeta too." She paused. "See, you didn't expect to find a friend in him, but you did and now you feel like your friend has betrayed you...you're blaming him for every problem in the world, but Peeta's not the one to blame here. If you took your heart out of the equation and looked at the circumstances...used your brain, you'd see that Peeta is suffering too. He's in the arena again along with Katniss...by choice. He could've let Haymitch go in and taken his chances on Katniss winning and coming home to him, but he chose to fight by her side to ensure her safety. To make sure she comes back home even if that meant he has to die to do it." She ran a hand down his arm. "Now, Gale...do you think for one minute that Peeta would intentionally leave Katniss with a child to raise on her own? And how do you think he feels knowing that their baby will grow up without a father? Katniss isn't the only one going through this Gale and for some reason you seem to be blind to that." She let out a little breath. "Peeta isn't to blame for this country's problems either. He only did what Katniss did...fought to save her life, not even his own, and he's doing it again. So, quit blaming him for your own anger... I'm not saying you can't be upset with the situation. What I'm saying is you need to face your own problems...your own emotions and stop pointing the finger at others for what's wrong in your life. If you want something fixed, the only one that can fix it is you. In the meantime you need to find a way to deal with your pain. Not only at the possibility of losing Katniss, but Peeta as well. How did you feel when you saw that boy die?"

"That's the thing...I don't know. I told myself it was for the best. I mean...if he's going to die out there isn't it better to go that way instead of being tortured by some Careers?"

Hazelle let out a little laugh, "Gale, Peeta *is* a Career."

She made a fist and pretended to knock on his head. "You're like your father, you know that? Hardheaded," she said when he missed her point completely.

Gale grinned, "Gee, thanks."

"You really believe that he's a Career, mom? Sure they trained for the Games, but so did everyone else."

"Oh, I *know* it. Peeta, Katniss and Finnick are the Careers this year. If I had money, I'd bet on that trio."

"They'll have to break up eventually though and Finnick is a tough competitor."

"Don't kid yourself. Finnick Odair has been fighting just as hard to keep Katniss alive as Peeta has. Mags sacrificed her own life so she wouldn't slow the others down. For some reason those tributes from District Four are doing all they can for those two." Hazelle gave him a little smile. "Wouldn't surprise me one bit if all three of them got to be crowned victors simply because they refused to kill each other off and between them there's nothing the Gamemakers can throw at them that they can't handle." Hazelle handed him his lunch tin. "Now go get ready for work or you'll be late...and Gale, I suggest you try and figure out exactly who it is you're angry with and why or that hatred of yours is going to eat you up alive."

There was way too much to think about as Gale walked to the mines. As he passed the Town Square he saw that the stockades were full again and looked away from the empty, worn wooden post he had been tied to. His anger did rule a lot of his emotions, anger towards the Capitol, towards President Snow, towards Peeta... There wasn't a

thing about the Capitol that he didn't resent. The smell of the baking bread wafting through the air fueled his temper even more. The scent reminded him of the bakery goods Peeta would bring to his house. Now Peeta's father gave them to Hazelle when she checked on Haymitch's house in Victor's Village. These were items that Gale would never be able to provide, though he was grateful for the extra food, the reality that someone else provided for his family, made him feel like less of a man.

He barely spoke at work; no one really did for fear of being punished. Even during their twenty minute lunch break he sat alone while the others talked about the Games, about Katniss and Peeta. It took everything in Gale's power not to walk out of the coalmine that day and find a way into the woods. By the end of his workday he could feel each and every muscle in his body aching yet he rushed to the square to see whose images were projected into the sky. Though he was relieved that Katniss' face didn't appear, he knew it wouldn't be long before the camera crews would be at his door for an interview. For her safety, he only hoped he could fake happiness when they asked him about her being Mrs. Peeta Mellark now. He still didn't know if his mother was right or wrong about Peeta. Hell, he didn't know if he was right or wrong about the guy, but the one thing he did know was that he wasn't sorry Peeta's face didn't flash in the sky that night.

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"Come on then! Come on!" Peeta screamed at the flock of birds as they retreated into the jungle.

"I've got you," Katniss didn't even know the morphling's name, only that the woman had painted her into a yellow field of flowers during

training and had just saved her life. She lay the morphling down on the ground and listened to her gasps for air.

Finnick stood with his back to Katniss, ready to face another attack, but the birds were now in the trees, silent and creepy. "Go ahead and take care of her, Peeta. I'll take care of them if they come back," Finnick dared the deadly mutts to try again with his furious glare.

Peeta lifted the morphling carrying her towards the sea and set her down at the edge of the beach. "You saved, Katniss' life," his voice was soothing and grateful. "Thank you, Priscilla." She squeaked out a little sound, and touched Peeta's hand.

Katniss knelt next to the dying tribute and cut away at the woman's clothes, revealing her wounds. The holes in her body were tiny, trickling very little blood, but Katniss could tell by the woman's breathing that the injuries she sustained were on the inside. Her lungs or heart, but there was nothing she could do, no amount of healing other than surgery would save her.

"With my paints at home, I can make every color imaginable. Pink as light as a baby's skin or as deep as rhubarb," Peeta's tone was soft and melodious. He remembered how much this woman loved to paint as he held her frail hand in his. "Or blue that shimmers like ice on water." He held the woman's gaze. "One time, I spent days mixing paint. Priscilla, I thought I was going to lose my mind trying to figure out what a goat looked like with the sun shining down on her. You see, I kept thinking it was yellow, but it was so much more than that. It was layers upon layers of colors...one by one I added them until the goat's coat was glistening in a ray of sun." Peeta watched as she swirled her finger around in her own blood and made painting motions. "I hope to capture the colors of a rainbow, but they come and go so quickly. A bit of blue here or purple there and just like that...it fades away into the

sky. Imagine what it would be like at the end of such a beautiful arch. How brilliant the colors would be. Would you be standing in the midst of it's hues or would the vivid shades surround you...bathe you in color?"

Katniss watched as the morphling lifted up a trembling hand and painted, what she thought was a rainbow, on Peeta's cheek with the blood slowly seeping out of her chest wound. Katniss sucked in a breath and listened as the morphling gurgled, struggling to capture the air she so desperately needed.

"Thank you," Peeta smiled. "That looks beautiful." Peeta had never seen anyone die with a grin on their face before, but that's how Priscilla died. Her hand dropped to her side, her eyes still locked onto his and like that, her life was over. The boom of the cannon resonated through the night.

Priscilla's hand slipped from Katniss' grip, dropping to her side with her last gasp of air. She watched in wonder as Peeta reached out and closed the morphling's eyes. 'What's happening here?' Katniss' head was reeling. 'I didn't even know her name and she saved my life. Mags died for me. Finnick rescued Peeta...brought him back to life.' She knelt on the sand and watched Peeta carry her rescuer's delicate, lifeless body, into the sea. He stood there and watched her float away before heading back to Katniss and holding her hand in his. "What was her name?" Katniss had heard Peeta say it, but couldn't remember what it was.

"Priscilla. Priscilla Tweed. She was thirty three years old and became a victor by disguising herself into the terrain until the end of the Games. The final battle was her against a Career, but she was so tiny...so fast, that the Career couldn't keep hold of her when she ran into a lake, she kept slipping out of his grasp, and when he tried to



capture her by climbing up the side of a mountain, he fell to his death. She was thirteen...Prim's age," Peeta blinked the tears that threatened to fall, away.

Katniss rested her head against his shoulder, "I'm sorry, Peeta."

"Don't be." He looked at her. "It's not your fault she's dead. You didn't put her in the arena."

Katniss had used the same argument with Peeta the year before when he felt guilty over Rue's death. Peeta had the opportunity to kill Marvel and passed it up in order to keep his alliance with the Careers. "Sometimes I think it is my fault."

He faced her and took her hands in his. "No, Katniss. It's not. Neither one of us are responsible for this."

"It was a mockingjay that killed her, Peeta," she mouthed to him. "A little coincidental, don't you think?"

"I think," he mouthed back, "if you let them get into your head, they're going to win." He ran a hand down her braid. The sound of the hovercraft flying over the Cornucopia had them turning their heads towards it. A claw reached down and picked up the morphling's body like a cheap toy in a carnival game and disappeared into thin air. "How many is that now?"

"Twelve," Finnick said with his arm full of Katniss' arrows. They didn't even realize he was there. "Here," he dropped the arrows onto the sand next to Katniss. "Thought you might want these back."

Peeta looked over his shoulder into the jungle. "Where are they?" All the birds, dead and alive, were gone.

"I have no clue. One minute they were here then the vines shifted and they vanished," Finnick answered.

Katniss picked up her arrows, "Thanks," walked into the ocean and began rinsing the blood from her weapons. She placed them into the quiver on her back and felt a sharp pain. She had forgotten that one of the birds had clawed at her back.

"Let me take those," Peeta lifted the sheath from her shoulders. "You clean up that cut." He ran his fingers underneath the slices in her skin. "They're not very deep. I think I got it before it did too much damage."

She let her body sink into the water and felt the salty sea stinging at her cut. Apparently it didn't heal everything. "This is only hurting me."

"Think it's safe to try for water again?" He asked her.

"Don't know, but we need to try."

Finnick stood at the end of the ocean, rinsing off his trident. "How's your back?" he asked Katniss.

"She needs to rinse it off in some clean water," Peeta answered for her.

"What say we cover her while she taps that tree you made a hole in?"

The water vein that Peeta had found was excellent. They each stood underneath it, washing themselves as it poured out of the spile like a faucet. They drank from empty shells and made a small camp where the jungle ended and the beach began.

"Stop it," Katniss scolded Peeta as he scratched at his skin. Their blisters had already scabbed over. "You too," she glared at Finnick. "Scratching can bring on infection."

Finnick dropped his hands to his sides. "It's itchy."

"Quit whining." She gave him a dirty look when he started to scratch again. "Knock it off."

Peeta kissed the tip of her nose, grateful that she was still there with him, and imagined her disciplining their child. He hadn't realized he was grinning at her, but the picture of her lecturing a little child about behaving brought warmth to his heart.

"What are you smiling about?" Katniss gave him a funny look.

"Nothing," his grin grew bigger. "Just thankful you're alive."

"Me too." However, two people died in order to keep her that way and she still didn't understand why. Times like these, when she needed to think things through, she craved the woods. Missed the sounds of nature, the solitude it brought her. In the arena the only option she had was the jungle or the beach and she wasn't going back into that jungle tonight. "I'll take first watch," Katniss said.

"No," Finnick's face was full of pain. "I want to. You two go to sleep."

The sun was almost ready to rise by the time Katniss and Peeta curled up together on a mat of soft moss. The day had been long. The night even longer.

"Peeta," Katniss placed her head on his chest and listened to his heart. "How did you know so much about Priscilla?"

"I watched her Games, and when we went into training, I talked to her." He stroked the back of Katniss' head. "She slurred a lot...barely spoke, but she loved art...loved to paint."

"She did what you did during her Games...camouflage."

"Yeah," Peeta grinned. "You should've seen her, Katniss. I swear she was seventy pounds soaking wet, so tiny, but boy could she hide. She could climb too...like you and Rue and she was a lot like Foxface...sneaking food after watching others eat from the arena."

Katniss wondered if she and Peeta would've won their Games if they had had Priscilla to compete against. "She sounds like an extraordinary person."

"I think she was at one point in her life, but then..." Peeta kissed Katniss' head.

"Then..." Katniss closed her eyes and gripped Peeta tightly. What a world they lived in where a promising young girl turned into skin and bones only twenty years later. She could afford food, but chose drugs instead, weighing maybe ten pounds more at the age of thirty-three than she did when she won her Games at the age of thirteen. It frightened Katniss to think about these people...these victors and what their lives had become. Haymitch had turned to a life of alcohol along with so many other ones. Drugs had been the choice for some. Very few of them went on to have a somewhat normal life. Perhaps Cecelia and her three children, but she was dead and what would happen to her three little kids? They'd all go into an orphanage and then the reaping when they reached the age of twelve. So many of the victors had nothing left, but Katniss had Peeta and he had her. She believed it was their bond that kept them from turning into just another victor, slowly finishing the job the Capitol had started when they threw them into the arena. 'Please don't let that happen to us.' Katniss let out a concerned sigh as she thought, 'Don't let our lives...our child's life turn into one of drugs or alcohol...don't allow our child to enter the arena.' She heard the rumbling of Peeta's snore beneath her ear. "Don't take him away from me," she whispered as she closed her eyes and fell asleep to the steady beat of his heart.

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Blood spurted from the mockingjay as Peeta stabbed at it over and over again. He ripped it from the morphling's body and screamed at the flock, "Come on then! Come on!"

Katniss held the woman in her hands, slowly laying her down on the jungle floor. Finnick stood behind her, his trident in hand, waiting to take on the next round of savage attacks while Peeta panted, poised and willing to kill anything that crossed his path.

"Finnick?" Haymitch turned around to see a sleepy Annie standing a few yards away.

"Dear, what are you doing up?" Effie spoke to her like she was a child. "Do you need some water or the restroom perhaps?"

"Where's Mags?" Annie looked at the screen.

Haymitch shook his head, "She's gone, Annie. A few hours ago."

Portia walked to her and put an arm around her shoulders, "Come on, Annie, let's get you back to bed." The woman shook her head frantically from side to side.

"Leave her be, Portia," Haymitch ordered. "She's a victor. She knows what goes on in the arena."

"Come, dear," Effie led her to the sofa. "Can I get you some tea?" Annie didn't respond she simply stared at the television screen watching for signs of Finnick. "Something to nibble on, perhaps?" Effie wasn't sure what to do for the poor woman. "Annie?" Effie held her hand. "Finnick is fine, but he wouldn't be happy if I didn't do all I could

to take care of you." This got her attention and she turned to face Effie with tears in her eyes. "What can I get for you, dear?"

Annie sniffed a few times and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Tea sounds nice."

"How about some petit fours to go with it? Hmmm?" Effie lifted her fingers for an attendant. "We'll take a cup of chamomile tea and a little sample of petit fours. Honey on the side." Effie remembered that Annie liked to add a spoonful of honey to her tea from earlier in the day. "You'll have something to nibble on, we'll drink some tea and I'll catch you up on everything. How does that sound?"

"Thank you," Annie smiled when she heard Finnick's voice coming from the television screen. "There he is." Her brows crinkled, "What happened to his face? His arms?" She began to cry when she saw his body covered in scabs. "No. No...no...no..."

Effie placed her arm around the rocking woman and said, "I'm not sure why you're crying, dear. Finnick is alive and well." She glanced down at Annie and decided that Haymitch was right; she was a grown woman...a victor and should be treated as such. "He might have a few bumps and bruises, but he's breathing."

Annie stopped rocking and lifted her face to the screen. "He *is* alive."

"Yes and that's what matters most." Effie took the cup of tea from the attendant and handed it to her. "Now you go ahead and drink this, while I tell you all that is happening in the arena."

"Effie, I'm not sure that's..." Haymitch didn't want her to describe Mags' death. Some things were best left unsaid.

"You were the one that said she's a victor. Now hush up and stop treating her like she's incapable of handling the Games." Effie scolded Haymitch. "Where would you like me to start, dear?" She asked Annie.

"Tell me everything." Annie sipped her tea, added some honey and picked up a petite frosted cake with a picture of a tulip on it and took a tiny bite.

The night was quiet in the arena. Haymitch, Portia and Skip went to sleep. Portia took one of the rooms in the suite, Skip the other and Haymitch passed out on a chair with his feet up leaving Effie and Annie alone with the Games. The screen was filled with different tribute's faces, but mainly focused on Katniss, Peeta and Finnick, obviously the most popular with the Capitol audience.

Effie informed Annie of the deaths in the arena, and how the Gamemakers had everything set up to happen at certain times of the day. "Each hour there's something new in the arena depending on where the tributes are located."

Annie watched over Finnick as he sat guard while Katniss and Peeta slept, quietly crying to himself as he gazed towards the sea. "I'm here...right here, Finn." She silently cried with him and wondered what he was thinking about. "He's so sad. He loved Mags. We both did," her tears began again.

"Why don't you sit down and tell me about her?" Effie suggested. She thought of the little game she watched Peeta play with Katniss in the arena. "Tell me something happy about Mags."

She sat down next to Effie. "Mags took care of us...me and Finnick...after..." she swallowed, "...after our families died."

"She took care of you?" Effie didn't know anything about Annie's family or Finnick's but she was sure that the Capitol must've had something to do with their deaths. Almost every victor in the rebellion had their loved ones taken from them after winning the Games. "What sort of things did Mags do to take care of you?"

Annie looked at Finnick sitting on the beach and smiled. "She introduced me to Finnick. Told me he was a pain in her tush, but she was just teasing. It was after I won my Games and we were headed back home on the train. Things were harder for me back then, but they're better now."

Effie remembered Annie's victory and how worried the Gamemakers had been that she wouldn't be able to handle watching her recap or her interview with Caesar. It was the talk of the town at the time and Effie thought the girl was a silly fool for reacting the way she did simply because she saw someone beheaded in the arena. She put a hand against her stomach and pressed the sickly feeling away as she watched Annie stare at Finnick Odair. 'My God,' she thought to herself, 'What kind of woman was I?' She reached out and took Annie's hand thinking, 'No need to worry, Annie. I'll take care of you now.'

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Finnick Odair looked out over the sea, trident in hand, tears in his eyes and a broken heart. 'Mags,' he said a silent goodbye to his former mentor. 'You meant the world to me. Helped me get through the worst time of my life...took care of Annie for me.' He let himself grin a little. 'You introduced me to her...changed my whole world.'

*The Capitol's victory party was full of their usual guests, only this year Finnick was sitting at the head table with Mags, Annie, the victor of the*



Games, and the rest of their team. He would've liked to help Mags out with Annie while she was in the arena, but the president had him booked solid. He had been with too many women since the age of sixteen. So many that he had lost count. "Makes no sense you keeping' a tally," Mags had told him once, but Finnick still didn't stop trying to keep track. After so long, you just blocked it out...tried to imagine something better. Then he learned how to take advantage of the situation he was in. Learned how to get information from these people that pressed diamonds into the palm of his hand like it was nothing more than a piece of used chewing gum meant for the trash. Tonight would've been a busy night for him, but the cameras were focused on him and Annie. No one could really understand Mags that much, he could. Annie could too, but Finnick had to be the face on television this year. Annie couldn't stop crying and no one wanted to see an old woman that had about ten teeth left when she smiled.

"It's getting late," Finnick said to Mags. "Let's get her out of here," he motioned to Annie, who was sitting with her stylist. "She looks like she's about to pass out."

"Yup," Mags wasn't much for words, but when she did speak, Finnick listened. She took hold of Annie's arm, and gently guided her towards the exit.

"I'll say our goodbyes. Meet you on the train." Finnick found their escort, who was quite tipsy, and told her it was time to go. "We need to be on our way or we won't be on time for our district's victory celebration." It took a little effort, but after a few minutes she began to gather everyone that was heading back to District Four and got them on the train. Finnick left with a quick goodbye to the cameras, avoiding the sponsors at all costs, they'd keep him talking and all he wanted to do was leave the Capitol and not look back. Not until next year when

*he was used once again as President Snow's puppet. "Ready to go?" Finnick asked Mags and Annie when he boarded the train.*

*"Yup," Mags answered for both of them.*

*"You heard the woman," Finnick said with a hint of excitement in his voice to one of the attendants. "Time to go home."*

*"Lookin fowad tew it," Mags grinned.*

*"Mags," Finnick gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Aren't you going to introduce me to our victor? We haven't properly met yet."*

*Mags waved a hand at him like he was being silly then said, "This hee's Finnick. A pain in muh tush. Finn...Annie. Night." She walked off leaving the two of them alone.*

*"Nice to meet you Annie," Finnick held his hand out to her.*

*She nodded her head and shook his hand limply. "Goodnight." Annie raced towards her quarters.*

*"So much for getting to know the new neighbor," Finnick said to himself before heading to his room to change his clothes. Nighttime was the worst for him. Sleeping was never a welcomed treat like it had been before he entered the Games. He justified his actions in the arena by telling himself that he did what he needed to do to keep himself alive, but that didn't make the images that haunted him at night any more bearable. After tossing and turning for an hour he gave up and went to the main car. He had no desire to watch television, recaps of the Games wasn't his idea of entertainment, so he sat in the gloomy compartment of the train, staring out the window and sipping at a glass of juice.*

*"Hello?" A timid voice spoke to him from across the way.*

*Finnick started, looking through the dark, thinking it was an attendant that had interrupted his solitude. "Go back to sleep. I don't need anything I can't get myself," he hadn't meant for it to sound harsh, but it came out that way.*

*"Sorry. I just wanted something to drink, but I'll go."*

*Finnick hopped to his feet realizing that he hadn't been speaking to someone that worked for the Capitol. "No. No," he stammered. "I...I'm the one that's sorry. I didn't realize it was you." He could see Annie's green eyes glowing through the dim train. "You wanted a drink?" He walked to the table that held beverages for them. "Juice? Water? Tea?" He turned to her. "Something stronger?"*

*"Tea." Annie watched him as he prepared a cup for her.*

*"Honey?"*

*"Excuse me?" There was surprise in Annie's voice.*

*"Honey?" Finnick asked again.*

*"My name is Annie, not honey," she said with a stiff lip.*

*"No," Finnick let out a little chuckle and picked up a clear glass container shaped like a beehive filled with a thick golden syrup. "Do you want some honey? You know...to sweeten your tea?"*

*"Oh."*

*Finnick couldn't see Annie's face very well, but he could hear the blush in her voice. "Ever had it before?"*

*"No. I know what it is though."*

*He took a teaspoon of it and mixed it into her drink. "Try it. You'll like it," he urged her.*

*She was hesitant at first then sipped at the cup of sweet, hot liquid. "That's good."*

*"Yeah," he lifted a spoonful of it out of the jar and ate it. "I love sweets. Can't get enough of them." He gestured to a chair. "How about you?"*

*"Can't afford them." She leaned over her cup and took tiny, soundless sips out of it.*

*"You can now," Finnick said as if it were a good thing, a weak attempt to bring a smile to her face.*

*"I wish I couldn't. Wish I could go back in time and never be reaped."*

*Finnick took a seat next to her in a very uncomfortable arm chair.*

*"Most victors feel the same way. We just don't talk about it." Speaking about such things out loud, especially on a Capitol train, was dangerous.*

*"Maybe you should," Annie glanced at him. "Maybe if enough people spoke about it, there wouldn't be any Games."*

*Finnick let out a pathetic chuckle. "More like those people wouldn't exist anymore." He lowered his voice down to a whisper, "Listen, you don't want to go around saying things like that and you definitely don't want to say them on a tribute train. Too many ears." As if they were being eavesdropped on, an attendant entered asking if they needed anything. "We're fine. Just want some peace and quiet." Finnick gave Annie a little warning glance when the man left. "See what I mean?"*

*She nodded. He put his feet up on the little table in front of them.  
"Couldn't sleep, huh?"*

*"No." She tucked a foot under her legs. "What about you?"*

*"Me? I rarely sleep. Don't need it." Was afraid to do it was more like it.  
"You'll feel better once you're home in your own bed."*

*"My own bed?" She asked him. "What bed?"*

*Finnick had been poor, like everyone else in his district with the exception of the victors, but he always had a bed to sleep on. "Where do you sleep?"*

*"My mom and I share a foam mat." Annie shrugged. "It's not bad. After the fire we lost most of our stuff and couldn't afford to replace it."*

*"Fire?" Finnick asked. "What fire?"*

*"Our house burnt down when I was younger. The coal stove blew up in the kitchen. My mom and I were outside working, but my dad and three sisters were still in the house..." She started to sniff. "...they didn't make it."*

*"Gee," Finnick didn't remember hearing about a fire in his district, but it was large and he rarely paid attention to the gossip around town.  
"Sorry to hear that."*

*"It happened a long time ago. I was ten."*

*'That explains why I didn't know about it,' Finnick thought. 'Must've been when I was too young to pay attention.' "And you've been sleeping on a piece of foam ever since?" He asked.*

*She shook her head. "No. We didn't have anything but a couple of blankets some people gave to us after we were assigned a new house. It took us a few years, but we saved up enough for something to sleep on."*

*"You're going back to that house then? Until your place in the village is ready?" There was no way he could allow her and her mother to sleep on a mat while he lived in a fully furnished mansion.*

*"Where else would I go?"*

*"You could stay at my house...you and your mother." Finnick sat upright, placing his feet on the floor. "There's tons of room and I live all by myself."*

*She was shaking her head in the middle of his pitch. "Thank you, but we'll be fine."*

*"I insist. You'll both have your own bed."*

*"No thank you," she stood up to leave. "It was a nice offer though."*

*"Wait," he got up. "How about Mags? Would you stay with her? She could use the help." Mags didn't need anyone, but it might convince Annie. "She's old...has a hard time doing things for herself. I'm sure she'd welcome the company. And you don't have to worry about her saying no either, she's like my family...she's always complaining about living alone." Mags never said any such thing to Finnick, but he was certain she'd open her home up to Annie and her mother.*

*"I'll think about it," Annie graced him with a shy smile.*

*It was the first time he had seen her smile. She tucked a strand of her light brown hair behind her ear and tilted her chin down a little when*

*she did. For the first time in Finnick Odair's life he was completely smitten and fumbling for words. "Are you...um...you're going to sleep then? Now?" He sounded like a fool tripping over his sentences. "I mean...you're tired? Damn," he let out a sigh and ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know what I mean," he let out a little laugh.*

*Annie's giggle was light and airy. "No. I'm not tired."*

*"Do you want to...sit and talk awhile?" He really hoped she would say yes.*

*"Suppose so." She sat back down in her chair. "What did you want to talk about?"*

*He shrugged. "Not sure." He hesitated before glancing in her direction trying to make sense of the butterflies in his stomach. "What do you want to talk about?"*

*"Nothing. I like the quiet."*

*"Me too," Finnick grinned. "Especially at night. Sometimes I walk along the beach and just listen to the ocean's waves lapping at the shore. It relaxes me."*

*"I like to swim at night."*

*"By yourself?" His brows shot up. "That's dangerous."*

*"It's just water." Her eyes glazed over and she stared into the darkness. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to enjoy that again though...swimming. Not after...the arena." She turned her head and covered her mouth with her hand.*

*"Yeah," Finnick understood what she was talking about. "I still have a hard time holding a trident in my hand without shaking."*

*"You do?" Her head turned so fast that her hair almost smacked Finnick in the face.*

*He thought he'd give her a little advice. "Look, being a victor isn't easy. We all have demons, so to speak, but you can't let that eat away at your insides. The way I look at it is where would your mother be if you weren't the one coming home tonight?"*

*There were tears streaming down Annie's face. "She'd be lost."*

*"Now Annie, your mom gets to sleep in one of the biggest, softest beds ever made. She'll never have to work again...never have to worry about you getting reaped again... You did what you needed to in order to save your family. That's all any of us tried to do out there."*

*He learned that Annie had three younger sisters before the fire took them, Tansy, Fanny and Brigs. He laughed when she joked about Brigs' name not rhyming with the rest of her family. Her father, Danny, was a fisherman, like most in their district, and had hung on in the hospital for three days suffering from third degree burns before finally dying in his sleep. His heart broke when she cried, which was often, and sighed when she talked about how much she loved diving deep into the ocean to see the different types of fish and coral under the sea. He and Annie stayed awake talking until the sun came up and Mags had walked into their train car and teased Annie about staying away from Finnick. Mags was thrilled to have Annie and her mother, Kathy, stay with her, and Finnick couldn't wait to learn more about the girl that loved the sea, with eyes so green he felt like they were piercing his soul. About the girl that rarely smiled and laughed even less, but when she did, it sounded like she was floating on a cloud.*

*"Bettuh watch yuhself wit dat un," Mags gave him a grin as she prepared a cup of coffee. "Dats da kinda guhl ya fall in lub wit."*



*"Knock it off, Mags." Finnick blew off his mentor's chiding, but she was right. Finnick had fallen head over heels in love with Annie before he stepped off the train that day.*

He listened to the sound of the waves as he sat on the shore of the arena, thought of home...of Mags...of Annie and allowed himself to cry over the loss of the woman that practically raised him after the Games. 'Oh, Annie,' he wished she could hear his thoughts. 'I need you.'

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"I swear to God if you say tick tock once more, I'll kill you myself!" Johanna turned on Wiress and yelled in her face. "Good." Wiress kept her mouth closed, but her eyes were open wide and filled with fear. "Glad we understand each other. Now let's go." She grabbed onto Wiress arm and tugged her towards the ocean, but the woman refused to head towards the water. "Kill me now," Johanna mumbled to herself before staring down her ally. "Nuts, I need to wash this shit off of me," they were still covered with blood from head to toe. "It's itchy and we're going towards the water."

"She's not comfortable going into the ocean."

"Lord Almighty, he speaks," Johanna declared into the early morning light.

"Wiress isn't thrilled about traveling through the sea. We'd have a better chance walking through the jungle." Beetee's voice was weak when he spoke.

"Fine," Johanna didn't give a shit, as long as she found Finnick and got rid of the two dead weights that were dragging her down. "Let's go." She pulled on Wiress' arm, but she stopped again. "Now what?"

"Force field," Beetee lifted his chin a little towards something in the distance.

"Okay..." Johanna said between clenched teeth. "You lead the way, Volts."

"I'm not feeling so..." Beetee began to stumble.

Johanna looked around the arena, threw Wiress' hand in the air and let the woman walk around in circles before pushing Beetee to the ground. "I'm taking a piss. If you two die while I'm gone... there will be a party at my place immediately following." She stormed into the trees and took a moment to herself. 'I can't do this,' she shook her head thinking; 'I'm going to wind up like Nuts if I don't find Finnick soon.' She noticed a fat fuzzy caterpillar climbing the side of a tree. She plucked it off, examined it and popped it in her mouth like it was candy. 'Great, I must be losing my mind, that bug tasted good.' She needed to figure out a plan and quick. 'Finnick won't be eating bugs, he'll be fishing. I have to drag that nut job through the water whether she likes it or not.' "Okay," she said to herself. "Just don't kill them and you'll be fine." She walked back to the spot where she left Nuts and Volts to find Wiress reciting the nursery rhyme and Beetee lying on his stomach. "Hey," she kicked him with the tip of her boot, "You dead?"

Beetee's head lifted off the ground. "Not yet."

"Too bad." She grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. "Let's go. We're walking the edge of the jungle close to the water." She felt like she had been traveling for hours when she saw Finnick diving under the sea. "Son of a bitch. I'm working my ass off and you're having the

time of your life," she couldn't help but grin. Only Finnick could look like he was on vacation in the arena. "Let's go." She dragged her crazy duo behind her, walking along the edge of the jungle, but Finnick started to swim to shore and disappeared from view. "Shit. SHIT!" She called out. "That's it; we're going for a swim."

"TICK TOCK! TICK TOCK!" Wiress started rambling loudly.

"Ugh..." Beeteen groaned.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Johanna yelled, not caring in the least who heard her. "We're going swimming and if you fight me, I swear to God, I'll drown your sorry asses!" There was no way she could let Finnick get away again. She had to catch up to him. "Let's go." She threw Beeteen towards the beach and dragged Wiress behind her.

Wiress just wouldn't shut up, or move. "Hickory dickory dock..." She started roaming in a circular path behind Johanna.

"That is it," Johanna said in a low growl. She gave up on trying to drag Nuts by the arm and pulled her hair. "You keep talking and I'm going to rip this from your freaking scalp!"

"...voice down," Beeteen said quietly.

"What?" Johanna hadn't paid attention to him.

"You should keep your voice down," he repeated.

"Me?" Her eyes flew wide open as they stepped into a shallow part of the ocean. "ME! What about tickety tock over here? Tell her to shut up!" Johanna went on a rant as she dragged them across the body of water, finally taking Wiress' arm again and letting go of her hair. "Keep it down? Why? Because someone might hear us? Who gives a shit?

Let them come for you! At this point I'm welcoming the idea of the Careers coming up on us! Come on Careers! Here we are!" The water was splashing at Johanna's stomping feet. "Hell, I'll throw you two to them and get the hell out of here on my own!" She turned to Wiress who kept on repeating the same thing over and over again and shook her by the arm letting her walk on her own, not caring in the least if the woman stumbled into the jungle or drowned. "KILL ME NOW!" Once they crossed the body of water she threw Volts onto the beach and was followed by Nuts who, Johanna was convinced, had totally lost her mind. Johanna's whole body was trembling with anger as she listened to Wiress' insane ranting. She began kicking at the ground as opposed to kicking Beetee who was lying in the sand and pushed a staggering Wiress down to join him. "Idiots! You're freaking idiots!"

"Johanna!" The sound of Finnick's voice was like being rescued from the arena.

"Finnick!" She called out to him as he raced towards her. "Thank God!"

"What the hell happened to you?" Finnick asked with a disgusted look on his face, stopping about a foot in front of her. "Did you slaughter something out there?"

"SLAUGHTER? Hah!" Johanna was more than grateful to have an actual conversation with a sane individual. "No, we got a blood bath."

"This happened at the Cornucopia? Goodness, Johanna...who did you kill so savagely?"

"No, not at the Cornucopia, dumb ass." She pointed to the spot of the jungle they had been in and began explaining. "The Gamemakers decided to give us a literal bloodbath over there. We thought it was rain, you know, because of the lightning and we were all so thirsty, but

when it started coming down, it turned out to be blood. Thick, hot blood. Couldn't see a damn thing either. We tried to make a run for it, I had Nuts over here and Blight had Volts, but...we couldn't see and he ran into the force field."

"I'm sorry, Johanna." Finnick said.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't much, but he was from home." Johanna turned her back and looked at the idiots she dragged along with her. "Plus the son of a bitch left me with these two morons." She pushed Beetee with the tip of her boot. "He got a knife in the back at the Cornucopia and this one..." Johanna thumbed towards Wiress.

"Tick tock. Tick Tock."

"Yeah, we know. Tick tock. Nuts is in shock." Wiress, who was making a circular shaped path in the sand, headed for Johanna's voice.

"Christ," She pushed her away, "Stay down, will you? You're driving me freaking crazy."

"Lay off of her." Johanna hadn't even noticed Katniss standing behind Finnick.

"Lay off of her?" Johanna Mason had been waiting since the start of the Games to give Katniss a piece of her mind. "Lay off of her?" There was fury in her eyes as she headed towards Katniss and attempted to smack her face. Unfortunately her hand was stopped by Peeta's vice-like grip.

"I wouldn't suggest that, Johanna," Peeta threw her arm down.

Johanna ignored his warning and went off on Katniss. "You whiny little bitch. I've spent the last day dragging these two around the arena...for you!" Apparently Johanna didn't take warnings very well, her body

language clearly stated that she was about ready to go into hand to hand combat with Katniss. "PUT ME DOWN!" She screamed at Finnick who had tossed her over his shoulder.

"Calm down," he threw her into the ocean.

"That little bit..." Johanna choked on a mouthful of water as Finnick dunked her head under.

"Knock it off, Johanna."

"You want to be on my shit list..." Her sputtering started again as her head was plunged over and over again into the sea.

"Feel better yet?" Finnick stood above Johanna with a grin plastered on his face. The glare Johanna shot him answered his question. "That good, huh?" Finnick let out a laugh. "Shall I dunk you under again?"

"Try it and you'll b..." Johanna took in a huge mouthful of water when he dunked her this time and spit it in Finnick's face when she shot up.

"You little..." Finnick picked her up and tossed her into the water.

"How's it feel?" Johanna tried to hide her grin. Regardless of what had happened, she was grateful to see Finnick again. "Man, this water feels good." She rinsed her hair off. "Nuts didn't want to travel through the sea."

"Has it been that bad?" Finnick asked as she began to strip out of her bodysuit.

"Don't get me started." She grunted. "By the way...do you know fireball saw me in the water after the gong rang out?" Johanna told him. "She was standing on a strip of land with you and making out with Peeta while I was..."

"Whoa...whoa..." Finnick held up his hands. "What are you talking about? I was with them the entire time and nothing like that has been going on."

"Could've fooled me." Johanna rinsed out her bodysuit and stripped her undershirt off, leaving herself in nothing but a bra and underwear. "I'm not blind. Those two were going at it while people were fighting to stay alive at the Cornucopia."

Finnick started to laugh. "Oh, Johanna," he grabbed her around the neck and hugged her like a baby sister. "I've missed you."

"What's so damn funny?"

"Peeta was trying to calm Katniss down. The girl's got a temper," he let Johanna go. "Kind of like someone else I know."

"Don't you dare compare her to me." Johanna stood up proudly and stripped the rest of her clothes off then washed it out. "I am nothing like that one," she pointed towards Katniss. "The girl's a total..."

"You don't even know her," Finnick rolled his eyes. "You're basing this on what you've seen on television? Come on, Johanna. She's not that bad. Kind of funny, actually."

"Aw, shit," Johanna made a face. "Don't tell me she got to you too? I can understand liking cinnamon buns, but fireball?"

"Cinnamon buns?" Finnick had no clue who she was talking about.

"Yeah...Peeta." She squeezed out her clothes and rinsed them over and over again.

"Where'd you come up with cinnamon buns?"

"Ever notice he always smells like cinnamon? And he's got a nice ass." She shrugged. "Cinnamon buns."

Finnick let out a roar of laughter. "Don't let Katniss hear you call him that. She's liable to shoot you."

"Bring it on, baby." Finnick pushed her back into the water by her forehead. "Hey," she smacked at the ocean when she came to the top. "Will you stop that? I could drown."

"Belts are a floatation device." Finnick looked her up and down and noticed she wasn't wearing anything but the belt. "I'd say you're safe, but you may not be if you walk up to that beach nude, so get dressed and don't cause any trouble."

"Don't cause any trouble," Johanna mimicked his tone. "Tell her not to start with me." She began mumbling to herself, "Don't cause trouble...I don't start trouble, I end it...yeah...I could end it with her...poison? Axe? Gotta get one of those. Maybe I could use some of those vines? Yeah...the vines..."

"What are you saying over there?" Finnick heard her talking to herself.

"Huh?" Johanna snapped out of her little fantasy world.

Finnick gave her a questionable look. "We've already got one Nuts, Johanna. We don't need another. Quit talking to yourself." He walked her back to their campsite once she put her jumpsuit back on.

"Hungry?"

"Yes. Oh, water." Plotting Katniss' demise was quickly pushed to the back of her mind as she stuffed herself. "I knew there was a reason I liked you Odair." She couldn't get enough water. "You always get the good stuff."



"Nope. That was Katniss." Finnick grinned at Johanna who stopped eating for all of a second. "She figured out where the water was and Peeta got the sponsor gift."

"You're just trying to ruin my day aren't you?" She drank more water and thought, 'Shit; now I can't get rid of her. They've got good sponsors. Plus there's that whole rebellion thing.' "Damn," she muttered to herself.

"What's your problem now?" Finnick asked her.

"Just realized I'm completely screwed."

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"What brings you here, darling?" Viggo was surprised to see Effie show up at his home so early in the morning.

"Do I need an excuse?" She placed a kiss on his cheek and joined him at his breakfast table.

"Of course not."

Effie hadn't slept in what felt like days, but she looked her very best, taking care while dressing prior to seeing Viggo. "It was a terribly long night and I simply needed to see you." She didn't even look at the attendant. "Coffee. Three sugars and cream." She rubbed her temple and waited for Viggo to ask her if something was wrong. Volunteering too much information would make it appear as though she only went to his home because she needed something from him. Ironically, that was exactly why she went to his home.

"Quite a night in the arena, don't you think?" Viggo sipped at his beverage. "Those pyroants did an amazing job."

"Yes, they were quite...thorough." It made Effie sick thinking about the woman that died such a agonizing death. "The Gamemakers have done a tremendous job this year."

"Breakfast, dear?" Viggo asked.

"No thank you," Effie forced a smile. "I'm afraid I can't stay long. Haymitch has been keeping me quite busy. He's quite rambunctious this year," she rubbed her temple again in an attempt to get rid of the headache that was forming behind her eyes.

"What's he up to now? Drunk off his ass I suppose."

"Oh, you know Haymitch. The man thinks I can pull rabbits out of a hat." She sipped at the coffee that had been placed in front of her. "As if I can somehow arrange a meeting with Plutarch Heavensbee," she gave her eyes a little roll.

"Why on earth does he need to meet with Plutarch?" Viggo arched his brow. "All of the Gamemakers are off limits during the Games this year."

Effie lifted her fingers to her chest. "Well, I know that darling, but he's insisting that Plutarch is the only person with enough power, shy of President Snow himself, that can approve his request." It suddenly dawned on Effie that Viggo would take this as a challenge to his authority. If she could get Viggo to approve a physician for Katniss it would make him look sympathetic towards her thus giving the President another reason to doubt his loyalty. "Of course, I have to agree with him. During the Games Plutarch is the most powerful man in the Capitol."

The expression that crossed Viggo's face was one of pure hatred. "Plutarch Heavensbee is a mouthpiece. He does what we tell him to do and orders the other Gamemakers around." The spit began collecting in the corner of his mouth. "The man is nothing but a plump kiss ass. A puppet for a man like me."

"Dear, I never meant to insinuate that you weren't important." She fluttered her lashes. "However, you are unable to approve things for the Games."

It didn't surprise Effie that she was caught in his grip and being shaken, she had come to expect such things from Viggo. "I can do anything I want." He threw her back into her chair. "Do you have any clue what I could've done to that stylist that works for your district? I could've had her killed like that!" He snapped his fingers in the air. "I still can."

"Then why didn't you," Effie asked innocently knowing full well why Portia got out of that room alive.

"She might prove to be useful to me in the future." He lifted his chin and leered at Effie. "You never know when I'll need someone with her talents...her...knowledge." This led Effie to believe that Viggo suspected Portia of being a rebel.

"Yes, she is quite gifted with a needle and thread." Effie sipped at her coffee, ignoring the pain in her arms where she was grabbed.

"Tell me, darling," Viggo stood over her looking down, "what is it that Haymitch needs so badly that he must speak to the Head Gamemaker?"

"A physician on call in our suite...for Katniss. It seems Haymitch is concerned about the medications he sends into her...the different

elements in the arena... You understand." Effie kept her eyes focus straight ahead. "Personally, I don't see the reason for it. It's ridiculous trying to protect her in the arena, but it is his job."

"No one would approve such a thing." Viggo took his seat.

"That's what I thought too, but what can I say? I'm only an escort." She gave her head a little tilt. "I have to force myself to sound compassionate every time they get into the slightest bit of trouble out there. Oh well...pish posh, I'll simply tell him no one could authorize such a thing. Really, other than President Snow, who would approve something like that?" She sipped at her coffee. "Dear, I have been gone far too long." She stood up and planted a kiss on his lips, trying to keep the bile from rising to her throat. "I'll show myself out while you finish enjoying your breakfast." She waved a few fingers at him. "Toodle ooh."

Effie didn't make it to the front door before she heard, "Darling...one moment." She turned to face Viggo. "Tell Haymitch he'll have his physician within the hour."

"Dear," Effie's fingers flew to her throat, "are you actually going to approve it?"

"Yes." He stood up straight.

"All right," Effie acted as though it meant nothing to her, but inside she was jumping for joy. "The doctor's name is Valero." She gave Viggo another kiss and said, "Thank you for making my job so much easier and not having to listen to that vile man complain about my skills." She left before he changed his mind and rushed back to the suite where she found Annie roaming the room alone.

"Hello," Annie said softly.

"Hello," Effie gave her a smile. "Where is everyone?"

"At the party." Annie shook her head from side to side. "I didn't want to be there so I left."

"By yourself?"

"Mmmm hmmm."

"Did you tell Skip or Haymitch where you were going?" Effie didn't like the thought of the girl taking off with no one to protect her.

"They're not my babysitters. I can go where I want to." Her eyes flashed to the television screen. "They keep showing Johanna and the tributes from District Three. Wish they'd put Finnick back on."

"Have you eaten?" Effie couldn't help but be drawn to the girl. She seemed so lost and alone and spent hours on end crying to herself. "I haven't had a bite to eat and I'm famished. Would you join me for breakfast?"

"Sure. Can we eat in front of the television?" Annie asked. "I don't want to miss Finnick."

"I can do better than that," Effie grinned. "Come with me." She took her to the dining room and pushed a button on the remote which activated a giant screen. "We can watch and eat right here. Remember, eating our meals at the table is proper etiquette and we must always have manners."

Haymitch walked into the suite with Portia behind him about twenty minutes later. "Geez! There you are!"

"Hello to you too," Effie chided him. "You see, Annie? Haymitch is an example of how *not* to behave when entering a room and greeting people."

Annie gave Effie a little grin and pushed her hair behind her ear. "No manners."

"Exactly," Effie said proudly.

"Great, now she's got Annie riding my ass," Haymitch pulled out a chair and plopped into it. "Do me a favor, sweetheart," he addressed Annie, "don't go walking off without telling someone first."

The television screen was now focused on Katniss and Peeta curled up next to each other.

"Don't call me sweetheart," Katniss said as she rolled over in a half awake half asleep state and wrapped her arm around Peeta.

"Sorry," Peeta mumbled.

"By the way, Haymitch. Viggo has approved Dr. Valero for your use during the Games," Effie nibbled at a piece of bacon.

"Viggo?" Haymitch sat up and gave Effie a concerned look. "I said I'd talk to Plutarch."

"The Gamemakers are off limits and Viggo practically insisted on taking care of this for Katniss." She flashed Haymitch a smile. "Who am I to argue if he wants to help the girl?" She gave Haymitch a wink.

Haymitch had to admit, Effie was a crafty...smart woman. "Guess you had no choice but to accept his offer."

"Exactly," she flashed him her trademark smile.

Annie gave Effie a little glance then said, "Haymitch, I'll tell you where I'm going as long as you don't call me sweetheart. My name is Annie."

Effie couldn't help but admire Annie for voicing her opinion much like Katniss had in the arena. In that moment, Annie Cresta had permanently engrained herself into Effie Trinket's heart.

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"You okay?" Peeta spooned Katniss from behind.

"Mmmm hmmm," she was feeling a bit sick to her stomach, but sleep felt so good the thought of waking up was unfathomable. "Just a little nauseous."

Peeta rubbed her stomach and kissed her head. "Good."

"Yeah," she snuggled into his arms. "Maybe I'll throw up later," she said with a sleepy voice.

"I'll hold your hair for you, sweetheart." He closed his eyes intending on going back to sleep.

"Don't call me sweetheart." Katniss rolled over and tucked her head under his chin.

"Sorry." He stroked her back. "Don't know what I was thinking."

"Think sleep." She kissed his chin. "Sleep is good."

Peeta grinned and leaned his face down. "You should kiss me."

"I'm sleeping."

"Yeah, me too, but you should still kiss me," he was groggy, but not stupid. He placed a kiss against her lips and felt her fingers stroking the back of his head. "Now I can sleep." he sighed and imagined they were back home, lying in bed together, and taking comfort in each other's arms.

It was midmorning when Katniss opened up her eyes again. She yawned and stretched before kissing Peeta's forehead and leaving the little shelter Finnick had built for them during the night. "You've been busy." She noticed two bowls that Finnick weaved filled with water and another filled with shellfish.

"They're better when they're fresh." Finnick took a bite out of a chunk of fish.

"Yum," Katniss was starving. The nausea was gone and in its place was hunger. She reached for a piece and stopped when she noticed her fingernails caked with blood. She had been scratching at her skin in her sleep.

"You know," Finnick grinned at her, "if you scratch, you'll bring on infection."

"So I've heard." Bathing herself in the sea brought on a bit of relief but the spots where she had been blistered were sore, scabbed and painful. Stomping back towards Finnick she stopped looked up towards a tree and said, "Hey, Haymitch! If you're not too drunk, we could use something for our skin," she scowled. The silver parachute instantly floated down to her and a tube landed in the palm of her hand. "About time." Though she tried to keep the scowl on her face, she couldn't.

"What's that?" Finnick asked as he cracked open another shell and popped a piece of fish into his mouth.



"Medication." Katniss unscrewed the top and the odor smacked her in the face. "Ugh!" She screwed it back on. The nausea had returned.

"Let me smell it." Finnick took it from her hand and sniffed at the tube. "It stinks, but it's better than scratching."

"Cover that thing up, will you?" She held her hand over her mouth and looked up at the trees. "Are you trying to make me sick?"

"Who are you talking to?" Finnick looked up.

"Haymitch," Katniss grumbled and ate a couple of pieces of shellfish. "Excuse me," she swallowed and took off running for the edge of the jungle.

Finnick sat back and watched as Katniss hurled up the few pieces of fish she had eaten next to a tree then walked to the beach and washed her mouth out with salt water. "Hey, Haymitch," Finnick looked up at the tree Katniss had earlier, "I think the smell of this stuff is making your girl sick to her stomach. You should probably send her something for that or she's going to dehydrate out here."

Katniss slumped back to Finnick and sat down. The silver parachute landed directly in her lap. "More?" She opened it up and found a little stick of something, a package of crackers and a tiny bottle of mouthwash. She held up the bottle, knowing that Haymitch sent it in so she and Peeta could keep up their lovesick fools broadcast without morning sickness breath and said, "Very funny."

"Hey," Finnick picked up the little stick. "This should help you."

"What is it?" Katniss examined it.

"Here," Finnick held it under her nose. "Sniff this."

"I don't smell anything."

"Now," he took the top off of the tube of ointment, "sniff this."

"NO...hey..." Katniss inhaled through her nose. "I can't smell it anymore."

"Some fishermen in my district use this. It blocks your sense of smell...some people, even fishermen, can't handle the smell of the fish." Finnick put it back in her little parachute. "You should eat those crackers."

Katniss felt horribly guilty and insisted that she share it with him. "You can have some if you want. I'll save a couple for Peeta."

"Katniss, there's about six crackers in that thing. Eat them." Finnick looked over his shoulder at a sleeping Peeta. "You really think he's going to eat those when he finds out you were sick this morning?"

"No," she grumbled. "I'll just eat two and save the rest. If you guys change your mind..."

"Eat them." Finnick insisted. "Or they'll just go to waste."

Katniss nibbled on the soda crackers and asked. "How long does that smelling thing work?"

"About an hour or so, but you've got a good sized one, so it'll last you." Finnick drank a little water. "On the plus side, you'll get accustomed to the scent of whatever it is that makes you sick. As the scent stays with you, you get used to it."

"I seriously doubt it," Katniss took the tube of ointment and began slathering herself with it. "Oh, man this feels good."

"It looks disgusting." Finnick wrinkled his nose. "You look moldy."

"Here," she tossed it to him. "It'll make you feel better."

Finnick eyed the tube with doubt then shrugged and applied it to his skin. "Oh, you're right...this does feel good."

"Told you." Katniss took the tube from him and studied his scabbed face covered in dark green ointment. "Poor Finnick. Is this the first time in your life you haven't been pretty?"

"I think so." He gave her a curious look. "This sensation is completely new to me. How have you lived this way your entire life?"

"The trick is to avoid mirrors. You'll forget about it."

"Not if I keep looking at you." He grinned at her. "You really are scary looking."

Katniss glanced down at her arms and took in the combination of bumps, scabs and ointment. "I look like what I just did by that tree."

"Speaking of," Finnick tossed her the bottle of mouthwash. "Mind using that. You're worse than the medication."

She was tempted to walk up to him and breathe in his face, but his stupid grin and his offer to rub some ointment into her back stopped her. She took a tiny capful of the mouthwash and swished it around. She instantly realized it wasn't mouthwash at all. Since Effie had smuggled medications into their district, Katniss had become quite familiar with the different types of medicines the Capitol used to heal or beautify themselves with. This particular one Effie had brought to them during her wedding photo shoot. Had Peeta taken it within twenty-four hours of his initial injury to his hand, he would've never

lost the feeling in his fingers. It was obvious to Katniss by the size of the bottle and the time period in which the medication was sent into the arena, that this was meant for her. She swallowed the medication, then took a sip of water and swished it around her mouth, walked to a tree and spit. She tucked the bottle into the silver parachute and tied it to her belt, lifted her face to the jungle and said, "Thanks, Haymitch." If there was any effect on her nervous system, it would be counteracted instantly and repaired by the next day. She couldn't wait to let Peeta know about the gift she received. "I'm going to wake Peeta," Katniss said to Finnick.

Finnick let out a roguish chuckle and rubbed the palms of his hands together. "Let's do it together...put our faces right in front of his."

For a split second Katniss almost told him no, but then she remembered the kiss while waiting for Mags not to mention Peeta's conversation with Finnick about her patience, or lack there of. This was a perfect way to get even. "Let's do it."

It was hard not to like Finnick Odair, especially when he tiptoed towards a sleeping Peeta and held a finger over his mouth to make sure Katniss kept quiet. To Katniss, he reminded her of a mischievous little boy trying to sneak a treat without getting caught by his mother. Their faces were inches away from Peeta's and Finnick was fighting to hold in his laughter.

"Peeta," Katniss shook him gently. "Peeeta, wake up."

The sound of Katniss' voice...the feel of her hand...soft...tender, had Peeta slowly fluttering his lashes open. He loved waking up to the sound of her voice. "Aaaaah!" He screamed when he saw two mutts in front of his face. Then sat upright, glaring at a laughing Finnick and Katniss when he realized they had played a joke on him. "Funny. Very funny."

"We thought so," Finnick said through his laughter. "Oh...oh, that was..." his stomach started to hurt when he saw the look on Peeta's face as he tromped towards the sea.

Katniss couldn't stop herself from thinking that Finnick Odair was nothing like what she thought he was. She had assumed he was a womanizing, cocky, arrogant man, but after spending some time with him she found him to be... 'Not bad,' she thought to herself. She gave him a playful smack against the arm and graced him with one of her rare smiles. The third parachute of the morning landed next to their feet. It was clear that the loaf of bread inside of it was meant for Finnick from the green tint on the bottom of the loaf. Peeta's lesson on the breads of the districts flashed through Katniss' mind. *"District 4 is shaped like a fish and tinted green on the bottom...you know...for the seaweed."*

Finnick's laughter had disappeared the moment he picked up the loaf of bread from District Four. 'Home,' he thought. 'Will I ever go home again? See Annie again? Swim in the sea at night with her splashing around beside me? Mags is gone, Annie. It's just you and me now,' he sighed. Allowing such depressing thoughts to consume him while in the arena wasn't wise. "This will go well with the shellfish," he said to Katniss. "Maybe you'll be able to eat something now."

"Maybe," she could see the sadness in his eyes. The loaf of bread had obviously signified something to him, brought up a memory of some sort that took him to a place of pain. "I'll get Peeta."

Peeta washed up in a shallow part of the ocean and stretched his aching muscles. "You stink," he said to Katniss with his back facing her. "I can smell you a mile away."

"You still mad at me?" She bit the corner of her lip.

"Nah," he turned to her. "That was pretty funny, but...why do you look..."

"Like vomit?"

"I didn't say it." Peeta grinned and stepped closer to her. "I was going to say, so green."

"Haymitch sent us some medication. Finnick says I look like I'm moldy." She placed her hands on his waist.

"Finnick is blind as a bat," he placed his hands on her hips, let his eyes roam her face and held her gaze. "How do you look so beautiful when you're covered in green goop?"

"How do you see beauty through green goop?" She asked.

"Not hard to do considering I'm looking at you." He pulled her closer to him and placed a soft kiss against her lips. "You do smell rancid though."

"I can't smell it," she grinned. "Haymitch sent me something for that too."

"Sent it to *you*?" Peeta held her hand and followed her up to the beach.

"Yup." She began to rub him down with ointment. "The smell of this stuff made me puke," she smiled.

"Really?" There was excitement in his voice. "So you think everything's okay?"

"I'm taking it as a good sign." She finished slathering up his body. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

Finnick tried not to laugh as Katniss devoured the shellfish, but it was too tempting. "I've never seen anyone so little eat so much. I'm going to have to go diving for more."

"Yes," Katniss agreed. "Definitely go diving for more."

"Told you she could put it away," Peeta sat back with a full belly. "Funny thing is she ate like this before she was pregnant too."

"I did not...okay, maybe a little, but not this much." She reached for the bread. "This is salty. I love it."

"I'm going swimming," Finnick smiled. "It's going to take a lot to keep your insatiable appetite satisfied."

"Leave me alone," Katniss popped a piece of the sweet shellfish into her mouth. "I'm eating for two."

"Two dozen?" Finnick raced away before she could hit him with an empty shell.

"Take it you're feeling better?" Peeta started to clean up the mess surrounding them.

"Mmmm hmmm. Haymitch sent me some crackers. I saved you two." She pointed to the parachute.

"Don't want them. You can keep them for the next time you're sick to your stomach." He peered down at her from his standing position. "Not sure that we'll have to worry about that for a little while though." Watching her eat, her face with bits of seafood on it, thrilled him. "Banana nut is going to wind up being chunky if you keep packing it away like that," he teased her.

"Are you seriously complaining about a chubby baby?" A rare thing in their district.

"Absolutely not," he reached down and wiped her chin. "Eat till your heart is content. I'm going to dump these shells." As he walked towards the sea he tried to picture her with a belly, not an easy thing considering she was so damn small. 'I'll never get to see it,' the grin he had plastered on his face faded away with his sullen thoughts. 'Never get to see my own kid.' He wondered what it would look like. If it would be a boy or a girl. Would it have Katniss' eyes or his? He hoped it had her spirit. Finnick was underwater on the hunt for more food as Peeta threw the shells into the sea. It almost broke his heart when he walked back to Katniss who had emptied the bowl of shellfish and was drinking about a gallon of water. Katniss was already changing, her moods, her body... He was going to miss out on so much.

"What's wrong with you?" Katniss looked up at him and saw regret in his eyes. "Why do you look so sad?"

"I'm not sad." He sat down next to her. "On the contrary, I'm feeling pretty happy right now. It's good to see you eating." Peeta was filled with sorrow for all the things he would be missing out on, but he wasn't going to let it get to him. He couldn't afford to. "How does he do that?"

"Who do what?" Katniss was thoroughly engrossed in polishing off the rest of the food.

"Finnick." Peeta pointed to him. "He goes under for so long, I swear the guy must have gills and a fins."

"Probably how he got his name." Katniss rubbed at her belly. "I'm stuffed." She sat up and looked at Finnick who had a fresh haul of seafood. "Wonder what he's got? Think it's good? What did you bring



us?" Katniss' expression was full of curiosity as she looked over Finnick's catch.

"All kinds of goodies." Finnick noticed the empty bowl of shellfish and quirked a brow at Peeta.

"Thought you said you were stuffed?" Peeta asked her.

"I am, but the baby can always eat more," she with a straight face.

"Then let's fatten that kid up," Finnick smiled.

Somewhere in the distance they heard a loud scream while across the arena a giant tidal wave hit a section of the jungle towering over the trees. In its retreat it crashed into the ocean so hard that even across the arena the water floated up to Katniss, Peeta and Finnick's knees. The trio scrambled to collect their belongings before everything floated away just as the cannon fired.

"How many is that now?" Peeta asked.

"Thirteen, I think," Katniss answered when out of the corner of her eye she noticed something in the distance. "What is that?" She whispered. There were three dark red figures coming across the sea onto the sand.

"Mutts?" Peeta whispered back.

With Finnick by their side, weapons in hand, they slinked back into the jungle ready for the next attack brought on by the Gamemakers. They moved closer and watched as something stomped on the ground and kicked at one of the red things it dragged onto the beach.

"Johanna!" Finnick yelled out and ran towards the trio of brick red beings.

"Finnick!" She called out from across the beach.

"Crap," Katniss rolled her eyes, but didn't lower her bow. "Johanna Mason." She turned to Peeta. "Should I shoot her from here?" Katniss said dryly with a face of stone.

"NO!" Peeta pushed her hand down so she'd stop aiming her bow. "She's with Finnick and...who is that with her?"

"That's Beetee," Katniss said with wide eyes. "And Wiress."

"She's got Nuts and Volts?" Peeta started walking towards them. "I have got to find out how that happened."

"Of course you do," she mumbled under her breath.

"I can hear you, Katniss." Peeta thought it was cute that she was jealous of Johanna Mason.

"....thought it was rain, you know, because of the lightning and we were all so thirsty, but when it started coming down, it turned out to be blood. Thick, hot blood. Couldn't see a damn thing either. We tried to make a run for it." Johanna was rambling a mile a minute. "I had Nuts over here and Blight had Volts, but...we couldn't see and he ran into the force field."

"I'm sorry, Johanna." Finnick said.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't much, but he was from home." Johanna glanced at Beetee and Wiress. "Plus the son of a bitch left me with these two morons." She pushed Beetee with the tip of her boot. "He got a knife in the back at the Cornucopia and this one..." Johanna thumbed towards Wiress.

"Tick tock. Tick Tock."

"Yeah, we know. Tick tock. Nuts is in shock." The sound of Johanna's voice had Wiress heading for her. "Christ," She pushed her away, "Stay down, will you? You're driving me freaking crazy."

"Lay off of her." Katniss immediately went to Wiress' defense.

"Lay off of her?" Johanna's voice grew louder. "Lay off of her?" She lifted a hand to smack Katniss across the face, but Peeta grabbed it, preventing her from reaching her target.

"I wouldn't suggest that, Johanna," Peeta released his hold on her.

"You whiny little bitch. I've spent the last day dragging these two around the arena...for you!" Johanna began a verbal attack on Katniss who wasn't about to stand there and take it.

"Bitch? BITCH!" Katniss started to scream at her and was ready to take aim again.

"Katniss!" Peeta stood in front of her, pushing her back by the shoulders as Finnick threw Johanna over his and helped to separate the pair. "Stop it! You can't kill Johanna."

"Why not?" Katniss tried to get around Peeta. "It's legal here!"

"But she's with Finnick, and he's our ally."

"She called me a bitch...a whiny bitch!" Katniss was struggling against Peeta's grasp.

"Oh...Oh! First argument! I win!" He had a clever expression on his face.

"What?" Katniss glared at Peeta.

"You said I could win the next two arguments after I ran into the force field. I'm claiming this as the first."

Katniss grimaced, growled and stomped her feet. "Damn you!" She couldn't go back on it considering he had just come back from the dead when she made the promise. "I hate that woman," she pointed towards Johanna who was getting dunked into the sea by Finnick. "Hah! Drown her, Finnick."

Peeta placed his hand on Katniss' bow, which she had inadvertently aimed at Johanna again, and pointed it towards the sand very carefully. "Uh...Katniss, maybe we should see about Nuts and Volts?"

"What did she mean she brought them here for me?" Katniss glared at Peeta, still upset that she had to cave into his request.

"You did say you wanted them as allies, but we won't have them for long if we don't take care of them."

"Fine," Katniss succumbed to Peeta's logic.

Peeta had to carry Beetee to the beach next to their little camp as he was too weak to walk. "This cut in his back is still bleeding...not a lot, but enough."

"Come on, Wiress." Katniss led the woman by the hand to the edge of the water. "Yes, tick tock," she answered the woman's peculiar ramblings. "I'll take care of Beetee first." She scoped the arena, cursed herself for not spending time in the plants section of the training center and cared for his wound the best she could. A bandage of moss, some of the ointment Haymitch had sent, which was attacking her sense of smell again then moved onto Wiress. Between her and Peeta they cleaned the duo up and washed out their clothes, the blood that had rained down on them soaked them through to their

skin. They watered and fed the pair and put Beetee to rest before Johanna and Finnick joined up with them. Katniss heard the tribute from District Seven's voice and felt the familiar sting of hatred...anger and she hated to admit it, jealousy course through her veins. She glanced up at her, thankful the woman was wearing clothes for a change, and put Wiress down to sleep. "Rest now," she spoke gently to the woman that continued to whisper the same bizarre phrases over again. "Get some sleep." She stroked her head and walked towards Peeta who was sitting with Finnick and Johanna. "I think I've got Wiress settled down."

"Good," Johanna glared at her. "Nuts has been driving me crazy."

"Johanna ate a caterpillar," Finnick chuckled.

"I was hungry." Johanna smacked his arm. "Didn't taste too bad either. Kind of like one of those chocolate covered jellies...without the chocolate."

"Chocolate," Katniss hadn't realized the word came out of her mouth as she was rubbing her stomach.

Johanna, Finnick and Peeta all looked up at her from their sitting positions with mixed expressions. Johanna stared at her like she was losing her mind. Finnick like he couldn't believe she wanted to eat more food and Peeta with a smile that could've outshined the sun.

"She likes that stuff you dip the fruit into." Peeta stood up and planted a quick kiss on Katniss. "Ate it by the spoonful while we were at the Capitol." He smirked at her. "Don't scowl at me. It's true."

"Well, you don't have to announce it to the world." She opened up the parachute and sniffed the little white stick before she lost all of her

breakfast. The smell of the ointment on her skin was turning her stomach.

"Where'd you get that?" Johanna asked.

"Haymitch." Katniss shoved it back into the parachute and tied it onto her belt. In the back of her mind she thought, 'I hope the smell of this green stuff makes you sick as a dog.' It wasn't a nice thing, but Katniss had never claimed to be friendly.

"I need to get some sleep," Finnick announced.

"My turn to keep watch." Katniss took her bow and arrows and sat at the edge of their camp looking out over the sea. The further away from Johanna the better as far as she was concerned.

Peeta sat down next to her. "Why on earth does Johanna Mason bother you so much?"

"Gee, I wonder?" Katniss mimicked Johanna's voice, "If you want a new work of art, I'm available." She glowered into the distance.

"Katniss, you're being silly." Peeta tucked some stray hair behind her ear. "She's not that bad, you know? If you talk to her...get to know her...give her a chance."

She threw Peeta a vicious glare, "Do not ask me to befriend that woman. She's rude...crass...nasty...she's got a vicious temper, look at how she was treating Beetee and Wiress."

"Johanna has a temper; I'll give you that, but look at where we are. Can you blame her?"

"Don't you dare stick up for that woman. She tried to hit me."

"And you tried to shoot her." Katniss shrugged off Peeta's argument. "Do what you want, but I'm here to tell you there's no reason to be jealous of Johanna Mason," Peeta said sweetly.

"Who said I was?" She was, but she wasn't going to say it out loud or anything.

"Not me," Peeta had to fake a cough to hide his laughter. He sat there for a few minutes hoping to pull her out of her sour mood. "Want me to keep watch with you?"

"I'll do it," Johanna's voice was like nails on a chalkboard to Katniss the second she heard it. "Can't sleep. You might as well get some rest, Peeta."

He was a bit reluctant to leave them together at first, but then thought they might actually find something in common, like their disposition, if they spent a little time together. Besides, he really needed to start working out the rest of the message Cinna and Portia had given him. "If you need me, I'll be over there," he gestured with his head towards their camp and kissed the top of Katniss' head. "Don't kill her," he mouthed to Katniss.

"We'll see," she mouthed back with a menacing grin.

They sat without talking, barely moving until Johanna asked, "What happened to Mags?"

'Now how am I going to explain this to Johanna?' Katniss wondered. 'You're not the best liar so go with the truth.' "Finnick had to take Peeta during a toxic tornado. I tried to take Mags, but she wouldn't come and..."

"Why not?" Johanna interrupted.

Katniss swallowed hard. "She wanted me to get out of the Gamemakers attack...the baby," she said quietly. "Finnick couldn't take both of them so Mags kissed him and walked right into the storm."

"She was Finnick's mentor, you know." The tone in Johanna's voice said it all. She blamed Katniss for Mags' death.

"No, I didn't."

After a few minutes Katniss heard, "She was half his family," Johanna lost the accusation in her tone and found grief.

The water washed up and down the shore, the sun was beating down on them; fortunately the medication had provided Katniss with some form of protection from it while the rest of their group lay in the shade resting. "So what were you doing with Wiress and Beetee?" Katniss asked.

"Told you already. I got them for you." Johanna looked at her. "You told Haymitch if I wanted to be your ally I had to get them for you, right?"

Katniss had never said such a thing, but there was obviously a reason Haymitch had chosen Johanna to be her and Peeta's ally. Finnick had proven to be an excellent one, thought Katniss didn't see Johanna as the same type of resource, she couldn't exactly argue with her mentor at that very moment. "Right. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it."

"You better. I was about ready to sacrifice them to the Careers before I found Finnick. They're complete dolts." There was disgust dripping from Johanna's voice.

"Tick tock," Wiress had walked up behind them.



"Oh, joy. Nuts woke up." Johanna got up. "You two can guard together. I'm going to sleep."

"Come on, Wiress." Katniss got to her feet trying to get the woman to at least sit down, but she was busy walking around like she was unhinged.

"Want some help?" Peeta walked up behind her.

"Yeah," Katniss said softly. "Yes, tick tock, it's time for bed." She looked up at the sun trying to determine what time it was.

"Pretty bright, huh?" Peeta stopped Wiress from stumbling around the ground. "Dizzy, Wiress? Why don't you rest?" He finally got her to lie down.

"I was just trying to figure out what time it was," Katniss answered his first question.

"It always amazes me that you can tell the time by the position of the sun," he looked up at it. "If I had to guess, I'd say it was...sometime during the day."

She grinned. "Look at where it's located." Her finger guided his watch. "It rose somewhere along there and it travels at a certain rate so when it gets to right about the middle of the sky...directly over us, that's about noon."

"See how smart you are," he stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "You can tell time by the sun, tap a tree, hunt for game... My wife is the best husband there ever was."

"Damn right," she agreed wholeheartedly.

"If we were at home right now, I'd take you for a picnic. Fill you full of chocolate and kiss you under the oak tree."

"Would you consider kissing me under the sun instead?" She turned in his arms as the crash of thunder and a bolt of lightning reached out for a tree like a fork of light slicing through the sky. "That's odd." They pulled apart, their kiss forgotten and gawked at the tree.

"You'd think that would start a fire or something."

"It hit that same tree last night." Katniss squinted towards it.

"I don't remember that. Then again, we *were* running for our lives." Peeta said.

"No...before that." Katniss walked closer to the beach. "It happened right after the twelve bongs then there was a thunder storm, but the rain just sat in one portion of the arena." Katniss turned to Peeta.

"There was the giant wave over there," she pointed to a wedge of the arena. "We were there for the sand storm and tornadoes," she moved her finger. "The rain was there..." Everything was suddenly becoming clear. "Then the mockingjays here..."

"You said twelve bongs?" Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a shrewd grin and looked at the wheel the Cornucopia was on. "There are the gears." Peeta met Katniss' stare. "Tick tock."

"Tick tock," Katniss arched her brow. "We're in a clock."